

Proven tips for a better night's sleep

We all know that having a good night sleep is fundamental to our sense of well-being and good health. Research has shown that ongoing periods of stress as well as physical illnesses can lead to insomnia. People with insomnia tend to have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep throughout the night, or they wake up too early in the morning.



Poor sleep has been linked to physical and mental health problems such as anxiety, depression as well as weight gain, inflammation. A good night sleep improves your immunity system and enables the brain, digestive system and cardiovascular system to function better promoting better emotional and social skills.

There is much that we can do to improve the length and quality of our sleep. Here are 16 proven strategies that have been helpful to many.

1. **Manage stress and healthy lifestyle.** We sleep better when we have a healthy lifestyle where we eat well and exercise regularly. Learning mindfulness and other stress management tools during the day makes it easier at night to calm our mind. Rushing through the day and multitasking are also to be avoided as much as we can, so it is easier to relax at night. Adopting a habit of taking 15 minutes during the day to be mindful helps in easing pressure and finding perspective. During the day take time to be by yourself to sit, relax, take a mindful walk or meditate.
2. **Engage in Physical exercise** during the day will assist you in having a better restful sleep. Walking, climbing stairs, being physically active will help your sleep. But avoid physical exercise in the evening close to your bedtime as this may be too stimulating for your body and mind.
3. **Keep bedtime peaceful.** Avoid discussing or dealing with stressful or anxiety-inducing situations right before bedtime. This would increase physical tension, heart rate and body temperature and most likely delay sleep. Often, you can discuss those difficult matters during the day when you are at your best to problem-solve.
4. **Enjoy sunshine.** Sunlight is important to promote and maintain your circadian rhythm. So, in the morning or during the middle of the day, when the sun is shining, spend time outdoors. It will increase your levels of melatonin, a hormone that regulates your body's internal clock which promotes sleep.
5. **Avoid drinking caffeinated/energy drinks** (coffee, tea, coke, chocolate), or eating a large spicy or fatty meal in the evening. Some of us are more sensitive to caffeine and need to avoid it altogether to have a better night's sleep.
6. **Avoid alcohol.** Alcohol has an initial sedative/relaxing effect but after a few hours, the alcohol in your blood changes into chemicals which cause you to feel restless, irritable, angry, anxious or depressed. After drinking alcohol, you may wake up in the middle of the night or have vivid unpleasant dreams. Alcohol can make snoring and/or sleep apnea worse. The breaking down of alcohol is also very taxing on your liver and other internal organs.
7. **Maintain a regular sleep routine.** Go to bed and get up at the same times each day, even on the weekends. This will help your body clock to function better.

8. **Limit napping during the day.** Avoid long day time naps. If you are very tired, you may take a short 10-20 minute rest or nap, during the day before 4 pm. If you have a longer nap you will make sleeping the following night more difficult, because you will have used up your natural melatonin.

9. **Create a relaxing sleep environment:** Keep your bedroom dark, cool and as quiet as possible and keep electronics such as a computer, TV and phones out of your bedroom. It has been found that exposure to stimulating objects and the blue/green lights from computer, phone, iPad and TV screens can affect levels of melatonin.

10. **Start winding down one hour before going to bed.** Turn off all close-range electronics(laptops, tablets, phones) at least 30 minutes before you go to bed. The blue/green light from their screens stimulates the brain so that it is more difficult to fall asleep.

11. **Engage in relaxing activities an hour prior to going to bed.** Meditating, breathing relaxation exercises, reading a book, listening to an audio-book, taking a bath and listening to relaxing music are all calming.

12. **Listen to meditation and relaxation exercises.** There are some specific **meditation and relaxation exercises** that have been found to help in getting a better night's sleep. You are invited to listen and download, for your own personal use, the following audio meditations freely available on this website that have been found to help to calm the mind and relax the body. You can access those meditation on <https://www.bloomfieldpsychology.com.au/resources/free-mindfulness-meditations>

- Calming Belly Breathing
- Progressive Muscular Relaxation Exercise
- Body Scan
- Complete Mindfulness Meditation
- Loving-kindness Meditation

13. **Drinking a soothing drink** such as a calming chamomile tea or a glass of milk prior to going to bed may help.

14. **Stay in bed only if you are calm and sleepy.** If after being in bed for more than 30 minutes you still are not asleep, and you feel restless, you can get up and do something relaxing. Have a glass of water, read a book, listen to music or audio recordings of relaxation exercise and when you feel sleepy again then go back to bed.

15. **Take notes.** If you can't stop thinking and getting ideas about the next day write them down so you can stop thinking about it.

16. **Practice Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).** Poor sleep is an opportunity to learn to manage your mind and thoughts to learn helpful thinking habits (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy-CBT). It's not helpful to watch the clock or worry about how much sleep you are missing and how bad you will feel the next day. Worrying about lack of sleep hinders sleep. If you can't sleep, the next best thing to do is to engage in mindfulness or meditation exercises to calm your mind and rest your body. Studies show that people with insomnia who practice Cognitive Behaviour Therapy(CBT) who have learned to recognize and change stressful thoughts, sleep better than those who take sleeping pills to treat their insomnia. CBT has the effects of sleeping tablets but without the long-lasting negative effects.

Here some cognitive-mind strategies that have been helpful:

- repeat a comforting phrase, prayer or mantra to centre and calm your mind
- engage in a visualisation like seeing a black curtain, or numbers one after the other, or a meaningful phrase spelling it out, giving it a colour or imagining being at the beach, using all your senses of sight, smell, sound, touch, hear. Eventually, the images will connect with images in your dreams keeping it enjoyable and calm.
- if you anticipate a stressful event for the next day, see yourself after the event doing something usual and mundane like grocery shopping or driving home.
- if your mind is rehashing or ruminating, keep bringing yourself back into the present, practising mindfulness, by being aware of your breath, your body and texture of blanket, again and again, until the intensity of the thoughts dissipates.
- being grateful, focusing on the good that is happening in your life, what you did well that day, what went well for you, what you enjoyed, what someone did for you that was helpful, thinking of someone you love or appreciate and so on. Saying thank you in your mind and smiling is helpful.
- being kind to yourself, relating in your own mind to yourself the way a friend would, being understanding and hopeful.

17. Minimize the use of pharmaceutical sleeping aid or prescribed sleeping tablets. If you are very tired, it may help to use over the counter sleeping aids or to see your doctor who may prescribe sleeping pills for you. Determining which medication may be right for you depends on your insomnia symptoms and many health factors. So it is important to consult with a doctor before taking a sleep aid. See your doctor for an assessment of your need. If you take sleeping pills, avoid taking them every night since you can habituate to them and develop dependence and tolerance. Instead, we recommend taking them every second or third night, so they remain effective for you.

It is also worth noting that good sleeping habits can vary from person to person. What promotes restful sleep for one person may not work for someone else. It is important to pay attention to what is working for you. Our psychologist will help you discover which sleep routine is most helpful for you while also explore and resolve underlying problems that may be the cause of your sleeplessness.

If you are worried about your ability to have a good night sleep, we would recommend that you talk to your GP for a possible referral to a psychologist who would help you do develop healthy strategies to promote a better night's sleep.

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