

12 Tips To A Good Night's Sleep

Stop the tossing and turning! Try these snooze-friendly tips.

By Amy Paturel

1. **Stick To A Schedule**
You've heard it time and time again – wake up and go to bed at the same time every day, even on weekends. Why is this so important? It all relates to circadian rhythms. "Sleep is a homeostatic process [a system where our bodies regulate automatically based on our daily patterns]," "If you sleep in, it might affect your ability to fall asleep the next night, since you have to be awake for a certain amount of time before you'll be sleepy enough to go to sleep again."
2. **Create A Ritual**
Engaging in a relaxing activity, preferably with dim lighting, helps separate sleeping times from times that elicit excitement, stress, or anxiety. Instead of trying to balance your budget or solve big family dilemmas right before bedtime, turn to soothing activities like taking a warm bath, meditating, or reading. It doesn't matter what you do, as long as it relaxes you – just stay away from bright light because it signals the brain that it's time to awaken.
3. **Turn Everything Off**
If you can view a clock from your bed, move it. In fact, according to Ancoli-Israel, getting rid of the clock is effective in 90 percent of people who have difficulty sleeping. "If you've just woken up and you want to know what time it is, you have to take yourself from transitional sleep to full awakening – and you've then made it harder to fall back to sleep," "Get rid of the clock and don't even open your eyes if you awaken in the middle of the night, because that will take you out of that transitional sleep."
4. **Create A Safe Haven**
Sleeping soundly requires the right environment – dark, quiet, comfortable, and cool. It helps if distractions are minimal, too, including exposure to light, uncomfortable temperatures, or poor air circulation, not to mention a spouse's loud snoring. While some potential sleep saboteurs are beyond your control, blackout shades, earplugs, humidifiers, and fans can help block out the major offenders.
5. **Get Comfy**
When it comes to sleep, comfort is key. If you have been lying on the same mattress for years on end, chances are it may have exceeded its life expectancy (most "good" mattresses survive for about ten years). Make sure your mattress is comfortable you're your sheets made from a high thread count. Encasing yourself in comfort will make for more peaceful slumber. Brands and prices of these items — whether sheets, pillows, other bedding, or a mattress — are irrelevant. It's how they make you feel that matters most.
6. **Watch What – And When – You Eat**
Don't eat anything two to three hours before your regular bedtime. The same rule applies to liquids. You don't want to disrupt your slumber because of the need for a bathroom trip. Avoid eating a heavy meal too close to bedtime, or spicy foods, which may cause heartburn and make it difficult to fall asleep. But you don't want to go to bed hungry, either. "Again, it's doing what makes you feel comfortable,"
7. **Get Moving**
Just don't do it right before bedtime. Study after study has shown that people who are more physically active get better sleep. "When you exercise, body temperature goes up, and it takes about six hours for it to drop again," Since a cooler body temperature is associated with the onset of sleep, an ideal time for exercise is the late afternoon.
8. **Use Your Bedroom For Sleep – And Sex**
Keep work, computers, TVs, and other distractions out of the bedroom. Reserving the bedroom for sleep and sex actually helps strengthen the association between bed and sleep. Reading in bed, for example, is fine if it helps you fall asleep. It's very individual. What works for one person may not work for another. It may mean taking sex out of the bedroom if it isn't relaxing for you and doesn't promote sleep. Bottom line: When you're in the bedroom, engage in activities that help you relax.
9. **Try Guided Imagery**
Your typical waking and sleeping times are programmed in your subconscious mind. Instead of counting sheep, try resetting the program. "Both imagery and hypnosis bring your brain into a deeply relaxed state," explains Donna Fremon-Powell, a certified hypnotherapist. "In this alpha-brainwave state, the subconscious mind is more willing to accept beneficial suggestions, such as 'You sleep soundly through the night and wake fully refreshed and alert in the morning.'" Hypnosis and guided imagery – even listening to an imagery CD as you fall asleep – can help you change negative sleeping patterns and achieve more restful slumber.
10. **Stay away from nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine**
If you need one more reason to stop smoking, here it is: Nicotine disrupts sleep. So too, do caffeine and alcohol – and the former lurks in more than just your morning cup of Joe. Tea, soda, and chocolate all contain caffeine, and they stay in the body for three to five hours. "People also need to be careful about what medications they're taking, whether they're over-the-counter or prescription medications," claims Ancoli-Israel. Beyond the caffeine contained in some of these drugs is the fact that drugs, by definition, activate and mobilize your system – and that makes it harder for you to fall asleep. Take

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medications and herbal supplements or other remedies early in the day, and don't drink in an effort to fall asleep. Alcohol may make you feel sleepy initially, but it actually interferes with restful sleep.

11. Immerse Yourself In Daylight

The body's natural sleep hormone, melatonin, is secreted in darkness and inhibited in light. So getting sufficient exposure to light during the day can help you stay awake and alert. By the same token, keeping your bedroom as dark as possible at night can help promote the production of melatonin and the onset of sleep. And while you can buy melatonin over the counter as a supplement, Ancoli-Israel claims it isn't the same as the melatonin produced by the brain. Still, 1 to 3 mg of melatonin taken half an hour before bed has proven helpful for some individuals, but Ancoli-Israel claims there's no scientific evidence to support the use of melatonin as a sleep aid.

12. Write It Down

Instead of ruminating over the day's dramas right before bed, set aside a worry time earlier in the day, suggests Ancoli-Israel. "It sounds silly, but if you take 10 or 15 minutes to sit and worry during the day (with the Blackberry and beeper off), it frees you from having to think about those concerns when you get in bed at night." If your sleep problems persist, keep a sleep diary, noting the type of problems you're experiencing and when they occur. It's a useful tool to have when you talk to your doctor.