

Sleep Better

Essential to maintaining health is a good night's sleep. The key to good sleep is a schedule. Simply put, we benefit enormously by *getting up about the same time every day*. Further, since experts recommend about eight hours of sleep daily, this simplifies our evening routine. We can get by with less for short periods but, over time, our health will be injured. Two definitions: *Insomnia* is the inability to sleep despite adequate opportunity. *Sleep deprivation* is having the ability to sleep but not allotting sufficient time to do so. Most of us suffer from the latter.

Why eight hours? Scientists have proven experimentally that sleep deprivation (seven hours or less) will cause "micro-sleeps" where one, obviously, cannot function. Interestingly,

Ten days of six hours of sleep a night was all it took to become as impaired in performance as going without sleep for twenty-four hours straight (Walker, p. 136).

Note that study participants were simply unable to assess their own dysfunction. They generally thought they were fine. Emotional swings and irrationality also spike in the sleep deprived. Brain imaging shows that the connection between our prefrontal cortex, our brain's judgement/analysis area, and the amygdala, our fear/anger area, breaks down in those limited to five hours of sleep a night for five nights. Sleep deprivation is also closely linked to substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. How about bio-medical issues?

Adults forty-five years or older who sleep fewer than six hours a night are 200 percent more likely to have a heart attack or stroke during their lifetime, as compared with those sleeping seven to eight hours a night (p. 165).

Sadly, there are also clear connections between insufficient sleep and problems with diabetes, overweight, reproductive health, and immune function.

The National Institute of Health put together this list of sleep suggestions.

1. *Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.* As creatures of habit, people have a hard time adjusting to changes in sleep patterns. Sleeping later on weekends won't fully make up for a lack of sleep during the week and will make it harder to wake up early on Monday morning. Set an alarm for bedtime. If there is only one piece of advice you remember and take from these tips, this should be it.
2. Exercise is great, but not too late in the day. Try to exercise at least 30 minutes on most days but not later than 2—3 hours before your bedtime.
3. Avoid caffeine and nicotine . . . [Caffeine] can take as long as 8 hours to wear off fully . . . Nicotine is also a stimulant, often causing smokers to sleep only very lightly. In addition, smokers often wake up too early in the morning because of nicotine withdrawal.
4. Avoid alcoholic drinks before bed. Having a "nightcap" or alcoholic beverage before sleep may help you relax, but heavy use robs you of deep sleep and REM sleep . . .

5. Avoid large meals and beverages late at night. A light snack is okay, but a large meal can cause indigestion that interferes with sleep.
6. Drinking too many fluids at night can cause frequent awakenings to urinate.
7. If possible, avoid medicines that delay or disrupt your sleep. Some commonly prescribed heart, blood pressure, or asthma medications, as well as some over-the-counter and herbal remedies for coughs, colds, or allergies, can disrupt sleep patterns. If you have trouble sleeping, talk to your healthcare provider or pharmacist to see whether any drugs you're taking might be contributing to your insomnia and ask whether they can be taken at other times during the day or early in the evening.
8. Don't take naps after 3 p.m. Naps can help make up for lost sleep, but late afternoon naps can make it harder to fall asleep at night.
9. Relax before bed. Don't overschedule your day so that no time is left for unwinding. A relaxing activity, such as reading or listening to music, should be part of your bedtime ritual.
10. Take a hot bath before bed. The reduction in body temperature after getting out of the bath may help you feel sleepy, and the bath can help you relax and slow down so you're more ready to sleep.
11. Have a good sleeping environment. Get rid of anything in your bedroom that might distract you from sleep, such as noises, bright lights, an uncomfortable bed, or warm temperatures. You sleep better if the temperature in the room is kept on the cool side. *A TV, cell phone, or computer in the bedroom can be a distraction and deprive you of needed sleep.* Having a comfortable mattress and pillow can help promote a good night's sleep. Individuals who have insomnia often watch the clock. Turn the clock's face out of view so you don't worry about the time while trying to fall asleep.
12. Sleep experts recommend that, if you have problems falling asleep, you should get an hour of exposure to morning sunlight and turn down the lights before bedtime. Daylight is key to regulating daily sleep patterns. If natural sunlight in the morning is not an option, use very bright lights in the morning. Ask Dr. Openlander about tips on buying a light bar for indoor use.
13. Don't lie in bed awake. If you find yourself still awake after staying in bed for more than 20 minutes or if you are starting to feel anxious or worried, get up and do some relaxing activity until you feel sleepy. The anxiety of not being able to sleep can make it harder to fall asleep.
14. See a health professional if you continue to have trouble sleeping. If you consistently find it difficult to fall or stay asleep and/or feel tired or not well rested during the day despite spending enough time in bed at night, you may have a sleep disorder. Your family healthcare provider or a sleep specialist should be able to help you (NIH, Medline, 2012).
15. A simple, effective trick to get back on track sleep-wise is "sleep restriction," that is, cutting down how much time you spend in bed. Ask Dr. Openlander how to undertake a program of sleep restriction.

- Walker, Mathew. (2017). *Why We Sleep*. New York: Scribner.
- https://magazine.medlineplus.gov/pdf/MLP_Summer2012web.pdf (p. 20-21)

