

10 TIPS TO BETTER SLEEP



A good night's sleep is important for living a happy, healthy life.

Create healthy routines for better sleep with these 10 tips.

These days, many obstacles get in the way of sleeping well: like noise, distractions, bright lights, stress and more.

Psychologists refer to the habits and routines we create for better sleep as 'sleep hygiene', because we want our clients to keep their sleep clean and peaceful. We know everyone's mind works slightly differently, and what works for one person may not work for the next, so please use these tips as a guide to create a sleep routine that works for you.

You don't have to implement all these positive changes at once, you can gradually improve your sleep overtime. Start with the easiest and most manageable first step for you: repeating that step over time will turn it into a habit, then move on to the next step. And remember the proverb: *'Rome wasn't built in a day'*.

1. Wake up with a little sunshine

Start a good night's sleep with a good morning routine

We all have a natural body clock known scientifically as the *circadian rhythm*, which can be activated in the morning with a little sunlight.

Sunlight triggers a fascinating biological process that works something like this: light enters our eyes and activates special nerves in the retina. A message is sent via the optic nerve to the hypothalamus to activate our daytime brain. The hypothalamus then tells the pineal gland to stop producing melatonin (a hormone associated with inducing sleep), and instead gives us a shot of cortisol to boost energy at the start of the day.

In other words, sunlight helps turn off your nighttime brain and switch on your daytime brain. A good night's sleep begins with a good morning routine, starting with getting a little sunlight and fresh air first thing in the morning.

2. Try to wake up at the same time each morning

Set your body clock for sleep success

Waking up at the same time each day synchronizes your body clock. Us humans don't like change, and neither does your body clock. By waking up at a similar time each day (within about an hour), you and your body clock get into a routine, which is great for your rhythm and sleep.

3. Do some moderate exercise during the day

Destress and decompress for a smoother sleep cycle

Exercise in moderation works wonders for sleep. It's hard to get a good night's sleep if we don't exercise during the day and still have excess energy at night. Regular physical activity can support restful sleep in several ways.

Firstly, exercise helps reduce stress and burn cortisol (the 'stress hormone'). Stress during the day leads to the buildup of cortisol in our bodies, which can have a stimulating effect on us and keep us awake at night. Therefore, using moderate exercise to burn excess cortisol and energy helps induce sleep at night.

Secondly, exercising at consistent times during the day can further assist with regulating your body clock which is helpful for sleeping well.

4. Try to eat dinner at least 3 hours before bedtime

Improve your rest by allowing time to digest

It's often difficult to fall asleep if we eat too soon before bed, because our bodies don't have time to digest our food. Digestion works best when sitting or standing because gravity can assist with moving food through our systems. However, lying down shortly after a meal hampers our digestion which can lead to indigestion, pain and discomfort which keep us awake.

It's a good idea to have your concluding meal of the day at least 3 hours prior to going to bed. Be mindful of what you eat for dinner and give yourself plenty of time to digest your food.

5. Avoid stimulants like caffeine at night

Unblock sleep hormones by keeping caffeine to your morning routine

The best time to have your last cup of coffee for the day is at least 6 hours before your regular bedtime: for many of us, this is likely around 3pm.

The reason? The stimulating effects of caffeine (found in coffee and energy drinks) takes about 6 hours to reduce by half. So even at around 9pm, you're still experiencing half the effect of the caffeine from your coffee six hours before.

Caffeine blocks the neurotransmitter adenosine, a chemical messenger that builds up throughout the day and makes us feel sleepy at night. Blocking adenosine with caffeine can cause you to miss sleepy cues and then stay up later than you should, disrupting your circadian rhythm and sleep.

Caffeine can also delay the release of melatonin, a hormone produced by the brain that helps us fall asleep. If coffee is your thing, try to make it your morning drink, as caffeine after 3pm can disrupt sleep in more ways than one.



6. Manage your stress during the day

Unwind your mind and body with daytime management and nighttime discipline

People experiencing much stress or trauma often have poor or disrupted sleep. This happens for two reasons.

Firstly, stressors are often carried from our day routine into our night routine. Instead of falling asleep we continue thinking about our stressors, and being unable to physically solve them from our beds can cause us to loop around the problems or solutions (ever heard the expression 'going loopy'?) This keeps us awake, disrupts our sleep and does not solve a single problem. It's impossible to fall asleep at night if we remain stuck thinking in a conscious state.

Secondly, all this thinking about problems and stressors at night produces even more cortisol and adrenalin (natural stimulants), which further stimulates our bodies and minds, making sleep impossible.

It's helpful to engage in stress management practices during the day and be disciplined at night in not trying to solve stressors after a certain time (unless urgent). Try to get into the good habit of not thinking about work after a certain time of day and then start unwinding your mind and body. A good cutoff time for this practice is about 1 hour after concluding work for the day, which offers enough time to vent or let off some steam if needed, and then start unwinding after the working day.



7. Create a relaxing night time routine

Smooth the transition from wakefulness to restfulness

Develop a relaxing routine to help you wind down at night. Remember, daytime is for thinking and nighttime is for relaxing and sleeping. Try to avoid any stimulating or confrontational games, movies or conversations at night time.

Engaging in a routine that makes you progressively more relaxed will eventually deliver you to the doorway of sleep. This routine may therefore consist of initial activities like reading or watching a relaxing story, then having a shower or bath, dimming the lights and engaging in activities like gratitude, meditation and prayer (depending on your beliefs).

This stepped approach to creating a relaxing night time routine helps the brain change its brain waves from a fast daytime thinking brain wave (beta wave) to a more relaxed wave (alpha wave). A relaxing bedtime routine can significantly improve sleep quality by helping your body transition from wakefulness to sleep. Research shows that incorporating certain relaxing activities into your nighttime routine can reduce time spent lying awake and improve overall sleep quality (1).

8. Dim lights and turn off screens

Turn down the lights and turn on your sleep hormones

Dim the lights and turn off your screen at least one hour before you go to sleep. This mimics dusk, which sends a message to your brain to start switching off the daytime brain and turn on the nighttime brain by producing melatonin, the hormone that helps us fall asleep.

People who use their phones and game at night expose themselves to blue light which tricks the brain into thinking it's still daytime. This light exposure late at night delays the production of melatonin, denying us our natural sleep aid.

Additionally, the entertainment found on screens is designed to be captivating and overstimulates our minds, making it harder to unwind and transition into a restful state.

Many people who experience poor sleep often take melatonin tablets prescribed by their GPs to help them fall asleep. Sadly, the issue is often not that their bodies can't produce enough melatonin, but rather that they aren't giving their brains the opportunity to produce melatonin by engaging in a health sleep routine. Try to get into the good habit of dimming the lights and turning off screens about an hour before sleep.

9. Optimise your sleep environment

A good night's sleep is all in the details

Create the right context for peaceful sleep by ensuring your room is dark, peaceful, cool, clean and safe. Once the lights go out, your room should be as dark as possible to let your brain know there is no need to wake up again until sunrise the next morning.

Consider using blackout curtains to block any ambient light, and remove any flashing electronic devices. Secondly, try to minimise noise as much as possible. For example, if safe, ensure your phone is turned off or set to Do Not Disturb to avoid hearing calls or notifications that would disrupt your sleep cycle. Research indicates that noise negatively impacts sleep, which potentially influences our health (2). Thirdly, keep your room at a comfortable temperature as being too hot or too cold makes sleep difficult. Additionally, maintaining a clutter-free and relaxing space can further enhance the tranquillity needed for a restful night's sleep. By paying attention to these details, you can significantly improve your sleep quality and overall wellbeing.



10. Try to go to bed at the same time each night

Sleep longer with a consistent bedtime schedule

Go to bed and wake up at a similar time each day (within about an hour), even on weekends. This helps regulate your body's internal clock and improves sleep quality. Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule is crucial for good sleep hygiene and overall health. Research indicates that regular sleep and wake times allow your internal circadian rhythm to operate more efficiently, helping you fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer (3).

A 2024 study by Windred et al. astonishingly reads that "Higher sleep regularity was associated with a 20%–48% lower risk of all-cause mortality ($p < .001$ to $p = 0.004$), a 16%–39% lower risk of cancer mortality ($p < 0.001$ to $p = 0.017$), and a 22%–57% lower risk of cardiometabolic mortality ($p < 0.001$ to $p = 0.048$), across the top four SRI quintiles compared to the least regular quintile." (3)

As noted in this research, adopting a consistent sleep schedule can lead to better sleep quality and better health.

Conclusion

Adopting good sleep hygiene practices can lead to better sleep, wellbeing, and health. Each person's mind is unique, so use these tips as a guide to create a healthy sleep routine that works for you. All the best for a better night's rest!

1. Start your day with a little fresh air and sunshine
2. Create a healthy morning/daytime routine
3. Engage in moderate exercise during the day
4. Give yourself plenty of time to digest food prior to sleep
5. Avoid caffeine after 3pm
6. Manage stress during the day
7. Relax and wind down at night
8. Dim the lights and avoid screens shortly before bed
9. Create an environment conducive for sleep
10. Go to sleep at a consistent time each night



References

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