

Sleep Tips

Although we may not like to admit it, most sleep problems are acquired from bad behavior. Over time, we teach our body not to sleep. We stay up or sleep in late. We eat foods that disagree with us at night, and we even enjoy a drink, caffeinated beverages or smoke, oblivious to their destructive impact on our sleep.

Most of the time, the best sleep help is learning what is causing the sleep problem and work to fix it. These sleep tips will help you identify what areas may be causing your insomnia and what you can do about it.

1. **Regular Routine.** Getting up and going to bed around the same time, even on weekends, is the most important thing you can do to establish good sleep habits. Waking and sleeping at set times reinforces a consistent sleep rhythm and reminds the brain when to release sleep and wake hormones, and more importantly, when not to.
2. **Prepare for bed.** It's important to understand that your body can't immediately switch from 'Drive' to 'Park'. You need time to slowly shift into sleep. Your bedtime preparation should include activities such as dimming the lights an hour or more before going to bed, taking a warm bath, listening to calming music, relaxation exercises, and lowering the bedroom temperature (60° - 68° is optimal). Just as you would clean a cluttered room, put things away (mentally and physically) that will distract you from going to sleep. Our bodies need time to produce enough sleep neurotransmitters to allow you to sleep, and lowering ambient temperature sends a feedback signal to the brain's sleep center, the Suprachiasmatic Nucleus or body clock, that it is night time, and that it needs to release more sleep hormones.
3. **Don't use the bedroom for anything but sleep** (and intimacy). Like Pavlov's dogs, we can unwittingly condition ourselves to not be able to sleep in the bedroom. If you find you can't fall asleep within an hour, get up and get out of the bedroom. Read a book or do some other calming activity for another 1 - 1½ hours before trying to sleep again. If you can't fall asleep within the first hour, you most likely won't be able to for at least 1 - 1½ hours (see 'sleep gates'), and staying in bed only causes stress over not sleeping.
4. **Use the mood tracker.** Often we can't sleep because of something we just ate that causes an allergic reaction or acid reflux. We usually don't know about the many behaviors, activities or substances can break our sleep cycle, but the mood tracker is perfect for ferreting them out.
5. **Avoid harmful substances.** This seems obvious, but many of the things we eat or drink can have sleep inhibitors in them. For example, caffeine even in small doses blocks sleep neurotransmitters. If you have a problem with sleep, cut out morning coffee and any caffeinated beverages. Alcohol has an initial sleep inducing, barbiturate effect, but also causes frequent and early awakening. Alcohol interacts with GABA receptors, blocking the brain's oxygen sensors, cutting oxygen and complicating sleep conditions, particularly for sleep apnea. Tobacco acts as a stimulant and blocks sleep neurotransmitters. Many medications, such as antihistamines, diuretics, antipsychotics and antidepressants also cause sleeplessness. If you're taking any necessary medication that interrupts your sleep, talk with your doctor about an alternative.
6. **Review the guidelines for eliminating stress.** Aside from physical problems, stress may be the number one cause of sleep disorders. Temporary stress can lead to chronic insomnia and circadian rhythm sleep disorders. The good news is that talk therapy and self-help tips are very

effective for reducing stress. Take a look at the 'Sleep & Stress' section in this web page for more information.

7. **Wake up right.** Sleep researchers at the Mayo Clinic believe if you need an alarm clock to wake you up, you're not sleeping right. According to Mayo, almost all Americans need an alarm clock, and almost half cannot wake up on time without one. Alarm clocks interrupt the sleep cycle and keep sleep from completing naturally, pushing sleep problems into succeeding days. Dawn simulation devices are much more effective at establishing a healthy sleep cycle and gently rousing you from sleep.
8. **Don't nap!** Napping during the day can damage a good sleep rhythm and keep you from enjoying a full sleep at night. If you suffer from insomnia, the best thing to do is keep from napping during the day. If naps are absolutely necessary, make sure you only nap once a day and keep it under ½ hour.
9. **Exercise.** Exercise is one of the best defenses against insomnia. Exercise increases the amplitude of daily rhythms and tells the body to promote deeper sleep cycles to help replenish the muscle tissues from daily physical exertion. Aerobic and anaerobic exercise seem to work as well. Some sleep experts feel that exercise too close to bedtime can disrupt the sleep cycle. However, tests have shown that exercise, even at night, had a positive influence on sleep. The best time to exercise is 4 - 6 hours before bedtime, but studies also show that people are more likely to stick to a routine if they exercise first thing in the morning.
10. **Increase your light and dark signals.** Your brain's sleep control center, the Suprachiasmatic Nucleus or body clock, uses signals to tell when it's morning or night. According to these signals, it produces certain amounts of sleep or active hormones. If you don't get very bright light like sunshine first thing in the morning, your body clock probably isn't working right. If you don't get dark signals in the evening and keep your room very dark at night, your body clock won't produce a full amount of sleep hormones at night. If you can't get bright sunshine in the morning, consider getting a specialized bright light box.
11. **Take the Circadian Rhythm Assessment Test.** One quarter of all sleep problems are circadian rhythm disorders where the body clock isn't functioning properly and so isn't sending out the right sleep signals at night. Most other sleep disruptions also affect circadian rhythms, which in turn compound the sleep problem. The assessment test can tell you whether you have a circadian rhythm sleep problem, and it develops a treatment schedule for optimal recovery.
12. **Stay away from sleeping pills, herbal remedies and melatonin.** In transient insomnia cases, these aids may provide temporary relief. However, long term or chronic insomnia can actually be damaged by these aids. Melatonin can help in some insomnia cases, but it is best to work with a physician on taking melatonin for more than a week at a time. Over the counter sleeping aids such as antihistamines, can provide some relief and are not addictive. Prescription sleeping pills are very addictive and should never be taken for more than two weeks. Long-term sleep studies show that sleeping pills do not improve duration of sleep, and more importantly, they do not improve daytime functioning.
13. **See your sleep specialist.** If you have tried everything else, now it is time to visit the doctor. You may have a sleeping disorder that is resulting from a physical problem such as diabetes, Restless Leg Syndrome or Sleep Apnea. In addition, many emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorders, etc, will disrupt sleep. If a physical or mood problem has been ruled out, your doctor should recommend a competent sleep therapist who can help with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or talk therapy. Specialists are very good at helping people talk through their problems that may be keeping them from getting a good night's sleep.

Stimulus Control: Treating Insomnia Behaviorally

Fortunately, sleep specialists have devised a variety of approaches for treating insomnia. *Behavioral* approaches involve actions you can take. Medication may help you sleep as you try these sleep-friendly practices. Combining behavioral and medical approaches works well for many people.

Behavioral approaches range from limiting the time spent in bed to making a stronger mental connection between bed and sleep. This latter approach is called *stimulus control*. Studies suggest that these two strategies are the most effective behavioral approaches.

Stimulus control focuses on the association between your bed and sleep. Do you find yourself balancing a checkbook or writing a letter in bed? In this way, you link bedtime with alerting activities rather than sleeping. The stimulus control approach helps you think more about your bed as a place for sleeping.

Also, put relaxation back in your bedroom by using your bed only for sleep and sex, getting in bed only when you're tired, and getting *out* of bed if you don't fall asleep within 15 minutes. Try a relaxing activity.

A sleep specialist may help you use stimulus control and sleep restriction strategies properly. (For more information, see the NSF brochure, *Helping Yourself to a Good Night's Sleep*.)

If you suffer from insomnia, consider the following guidelines for better sleep:

- Exercise regularly, about six hours before you want to sleep.
- Avoid napping.
- Go to sleep and wake at the same time every day.
- Save your worries for daytime (If concerns come to mind in bed, write them down in a "worry" book, then close the book until the morning.).
- Select a relaxing bedtime ritual, like a hot bath or listening to calming music.