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Suggestions for Better Sleep

Achieving deep, refreshing sleep isn't always as simple as cozying up in bed and closing your eyes – it often depends on your daily lifestyle choices and habits. From how you unwind before bed to what you eat, small adjustments can make a big difference in your sleep. This guide walks you through suggestions that can help you achieve better sleep, so you can wake up feeling well-rested, energetic, and ready to start your day.

Step 1: Tune Up Your Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene is a set of healthy habits and environmental conditions that can help you sleep soundly. If you are struggling with your sleep, tuning up your sleep hygiene is the place to start. Try the following sleep hygiene tune-ups for better sleep:

- **Go to bed and wake up at the same time daily.** A consistent waking time and bedtime each day supports your circadian rhythm, your body's internal 24-hour clock that regulates sleep and other body functions. A healthy circadian rhythm helps you stay alert and energetic during the day and eases you to sleep at night.[1] Ideally, your bedtime and wake time should be set to allow for 7-9 hours of sleep each night.[2]
- **Sleep in a dark bedroom.** Darkness promotes sleep by supporting a healthy circadian rhythm. Even dim artificial light exposure at night from sources like streetlights can interfere with melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep.[3,4] If you have lights outside your bedroom at night or work the night shift and sleep during the day, hang blackout curtains on your bedroom windows or wear an eye mask. Remove electronics that have bright lights from your bedroom. For example, replace a glowing digital alarm clock with a non-digital alarm clock.
- **Avoid spending time on electronic devices two hours before bed.**[5,6] The bright light from electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets can increase alertness and reduce sleepiness, making it harder to drift off to sleep.[5,7] Pick an activity that doesn't involve electronic devices before bed. For example, read a hardcover or paperback book.[8-10] If you must use electronic devices like eReaders close to bedtime, put the device on "nighttime mode." Wearing blue light-blocking glasses while using electronic devices at night may reduce the negative impact of these devices on sleep.[11]

- **Sleep in a cool bedroom.** Warm temperatures are associated with worse sleep.[12] Keeping your bedroom cool may help your body lower its temperature naturally at bedtime, which is associated with restful sleep.[13] Sleep experts suggest that keeping your bedroom in the range of 65-68° Fahrenheit/18-20° Celsius, may be ideal for supporting restful sleep.[14,15] If you don't have air conditioning to keep your bedroom cool in the summer, open a window at night to lower your bedroom temperature.
- **Take a hot shower or bath before bed.** Bathing in warm water before bed is tied to better sleep because, counterintuitively, it can lower body temperature by increasing blood flow to the skin. A lower body temperature at night is linked to better sleep.[16]
- **Avoid napping late in the day.** Naps offer many benefits, including offsetting sleep deprivation. However, napping can reduce sleep pressure, your body's natural urge to sleep that increases the longer you stay awake, making it harder to sleep at night.[17,18] Sleep pressure may be especially reduced if you nap in the late afternoon or evening. If you need to nap during the day and want to avoid disrupting your sleep at night, aim to nap between 1:00 and 3:00 pm.
- **Be mindful of EMFs.** Electromagnetic fields (EMFs) are areas of energy invisible to the naked eye. Natural EMFs come from the sun and the earth's magnetic field, while human-made EMFs come from electric power, including sources such as electrical wiring, wireless devices such as cell phones, electric ranges, fluorescent lights, and computers.[19] EMF exposure is associated with decreased melatonin, which might make it harder to sleep.[20-22] More research is needed to better understand how EMFs affect sleep. Best practice may be to minimize sleeping near EMFs that you can control. For example, if you use your cell phone, which emits EMFs, as an alarm clock, keep it outside your bedroom or use a non-digital alarm clock instead.
- **Reserve your bedroom for sleeping.** Using your bedroom as a place to work, exercise, watch TV, or do other non-sleep activities can train your brain to associate the space with alertness, ultimately making it hard to fall asleep there.[23] Use your bed and bedroom for sleep and sex only if possible. If you need to exercise or work in your bedroom during the day, create an arrangement where you can conceal your exercise or work equipment at night when you're sleeping.

Step 2: De-Stress for Sound Sleep

Stress can be a barrier to sound sleep. Try the following stress management strategies for restful sleep:

- **Avoid stressors before bed.** When you are stressed out or worried at bedtime, racing thoughts and surging stress hormones may make it hard to fall asleep.[24,25] Avoid things that raise your stress before bed, whether that's watching the news, paying bills, scrolling on social media, or having a tense conversation with your partner. If you often perform stressful activities, such as bill paying, in the evening, try setting aside time earlier in the day to do these tasks.
- **Try meditation.** Meditation is linked to improved sleep. It may release tension and help you relax so you can fall asleep more easily.[26] New to meditation? Try an app with guided meditations for sleep.[27,28]

- **Try aromatherapy.** Aromatherapy is the use of essential oils to support well-being. Aromatherapy with lavender, sweet orange, and bergamot essential oils is associated with increased sleep time and decreased waking at night.[29] Essential oils can be diffused or diluted in a carrier oil, such as sweet almond oil, and applied in small amounts topically. Consult your healthcare provider before applying any essential oils topically.

Step 3: Eat and Drink for Restful Sleep

What and when you eat and drink can either help or hinder sleep. The following food and drink guidelines are linked to better sleep.

- **Adjust your caffeine habits to improve sleep.** Consuming caffeine close to bedtime makes it hard to fall and stay asleep.[30] Avoid caffeine 8-9 hours before bed to avoid sleep issues.[30] Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, yerba mate, chocolate, and pre-workout supplements.
- **Moderate your alcohol intake.** You may have noticed that you fall asleep quickly after drinking alcohol. However, drinking alcohol before bed makes sleep less restorative by decreasing rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is important for healthy brain function.[31] Try to avoid drinking alcohol three hours before bed.[32]
- **Reduce inflammatory foods in your diet.** Ongoing, low-level inflammation is associated with many health problems, including sleep issues.[33] Some foods work to control inflammation while others can increase it. For better sleep, reduce foods that increase inflammation, including those made with white flour, added sugar, and fried foods.
- **Avoid eating late at night.** Avoid eating large meals close to bedtime as this may disturb sleep by triggering hormones that interfere with sleep or by worsening gut issues like gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).[34,15] If you must eat close to bed, make it a small meal and avoid eating foods that upset your digestive system.

Step 4: Fall Asleep Faster by Exercising Regularly

Exercise supports nearly every aspect of your health, including sleep! Exercise may support sleep by helping you fall asleep quickly and reduce waking at night.[35]

- **Exercise regularly.** Try to exercise 2-5 times a week for 30-60 minutes to support healthy sleep.[35] If you are new to exercise, work with your healthcare provider to select a type and frequency of exercise that is appropriate for you.
- **Avoid doing intense exercise less than an hour before bed.** It may take longer to fall asleep and be harder to stay asleep after intense exercise.[36] Reserve your intense workouts for the morning or afternoon.

Beyond the Basics: Additional Considerations for Sleep

Diet and lifestyle choices can play a significant role in promoting healthy sleep. In some cases, nutritional supplements provide additional benefits.

Two categories of supplements can aid sleep: Nutraceuticals, which are dietary ingredients with health-promoting effects, and herbs. Nutraceuticals linked to a better night's sleep include melatonin, magnesium, and L-theanine.[37-41] Herbs that support sleep include ashwagandha, valerian, chamomile, lavender, passionflower, and lemon balm.[42-48] Talk with your healthcare practitioner to determine which supplements are right for you and how much to take. Your provider can identify potential drug-nutrient/drug-herb interactions and other conditions that rule out the use of specific sleep supplements and ensure a supplement is safe for you.

Finally, if changes to your diet and lifestyle don't resolve your sleep issues, it is important to explore other possible root causes of sleep disturbances with your healthcare provider.

Other issues that may make it hard to fall or stay asleep include:

- **Circadian rhythm disorders:** Your circadian rhythm regulates your body's sleep-wake cycle. Sometimes, the circadian rhythm doesn't work correctly, leading to sleep issues. Work with your healthcare provider to access the appropriate testing and interventions for circadian rhythm disorders.
- **Sleep apnea:** Do you snore, grind or clench your jaw at night, or feel tired even after a full night's sleep? These are just a few signs of sleep apnea, a disorder that causes breathing to stop during sleep, making it hard to sleep well. Talk with your healthcare practitioner to determine whether sleep apnea screening and testing is right for you.
- **Medication-sleep interactions:** Some medications can disrupt sleep, such as stimulant medications for ADHD.[49] Do not stop taking medications without talking with your healthcare practitioner.
- **Mental health conditions:** Mental health conditions, such as anxiety, are linked to sleep difficulties.[50,51] Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) is a non-prescription behavioral treatment used to reestablish healthy sleep that may be helpful for people dealing with both mental health and sleep challenges.[52] CBT-I is usually administered by a licensed mental health professional.
- **Digestive disorders:** Digestive disorders can cause discomfort that interferes with sleep.[53,54] Consult your healthcare provider to see if gut imbalances could be impacting your sleep.

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