



ORACLEMED HEALTH



7 ways to get a good night's sleep

Sleep is one of the pillars of optimal health. A lack of sleep, however, can be debilitating. Besides putting you on edge, it can leave you feeling exhausted, cranky and poorly equipped to handle the stress of your busy life and job. Stress, in turn, can interfere severely with sleep, simultaneously affecting your blood pressure and heart health.

Here are 7 sleep habits to improve your chances of a good night's sleep...

1. Stick to a sleep schedule

One of the best ways to sleep better is to get into a sleep pattern and maintain that routine. Try to go to bed and wake up at roughly the same time every day. Over the weekend, try not to sleep in for hours and hours; instead, simply add on 30-60 minutes of sleep time on Saturdays and Sundays. This will help to regulate your body clock and could help you fall asleep quicker... and stay asleep for longer. If you are struggling to make it through the day, a short 20-minute power nap might help, but make sure you don't do this too late in the day.

2. Practise a relaxing bedtime ritual

A relaxing, routine activity every night will help your body to get ready for sleep. Start by dimming lights as early as possible (think dinner by candlelight, every evening). Stay away from activities that cause stress, anxiety or too much excitement. Having a bath and listening to soothing music at a low volume is a good option because it will help you to 'wash the day off you' and unwind, plus get you in the right, (relaxed) headspace for bedtime.

3. Transform your bedroom into a sleep sanctuary

This means no work, no clutter, no TV and no mobile phone at least an hour before bedtime. Blue light from screens (phones, iPads, laptops and TVs) is one of the worst culprits, as this artificial light tricks your brain into thinking that it's still daytime. It also disrupts your brain's natural sleep-wake cycles. Instead, go old-school with a novel, magazine or newspaper and an analog alarm clock. Your refreshed body (and revitalised brain) will thank you in the morning.

4. Make sure that your room is dark enough

Check that your curtains or blinds are sufficient when it comes to blocking outside light, which can disrupt your sleep. Depending on which direction your bedroom faces, if the sunlight is really harsh in the morning, you might need to opt for both curtains and blinds or total blackout curtains. However, this might make your room quite hot, so make sure that all the windows are kept wide open (or invest in a good fan) to help keep your room cool, at the optimum 18 degrees Centigrade for sleep.

5. Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows

In all likelihood, the mattress you have been using for years and years has probably passed its life expectancy – about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. The same goes for pillows, which have probably been taken from one bedroom to the next (and one family member to the next), which means that the support from them is completely gone and they are also full of dust mites and allergens. With the average person getting upwards of 200 000 hours of sleep in their lifetime, it pays to invest in a good quality mattress and pillows every few years to give your body the proper support and comfort that it needs for a good night's rest.

6. Avoid stimulants and other sleep disruptors

Drinks very late in the day might make you have to get up for the bathroom several times a night. Drinks with lots of caffeine in them, such as tea, coffee and soft drinks can also increase your energy levels and disrupt your sleep; similarly, alcohol and cigarettes have the same result. Also, watch what you have for dinner. Eating big or spicy meals can cause discomfort from indigestion, which can make it hard to sleep. If possible, avoid eating a large meal two hours before bedtime. Rather have a small supper, then a light snack just before bed if you are still hungry. Bananas are a great choice just before bed, as they are complex carbs that are a good source of magnesium, which helps calm stress hormones and therefore promote better sleep.

7. Exercise daily

Vigorous exercise is best, but even light activity is better than no activity, when it comes to sleep. Exercise at any time of the day – at least 2 hours before bed – but not at the expense of your sleep. Exercise also reduces insomnia, by decreasing arousal, anxiety and symptoms of depression. Best of all, exercise triggers an increase in body temperature and the post-exercise drop in temperature may promote falling asleep. If you can train with your family, besides bonding, the added bonus is that you will all have a better night's sleep.

"If you attempt to make positive changes to your sleep habits, but still toss and turn, talk to your doctor about other solutions or tips to try that may help you to get the rest that you need. Remember, good quality sleep can affect your overall health, so make sure that it is at the top of your priority list."

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