Summary

‘Sleep hygiene’ means habits that help you to have a good night’s sleep. Common sleeping problems (such as insomnia) are often caused by bad habits reinforced over years or even decades. If you have tried and failed to improve your sleep, you may like to consider professional help.

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Obey your body clock

The body’s alternating sleep-wake cycle is controlled by an internal ‘clock’ within the brain. Most bodily processes (such as temperature and brain states) are synchronised to this 24-hour physiological clock. Getting a good sleep means working with your body clock, not against it. Suggestions include:

- Get up at the same time every day. Soon this strict routine will help to ‘set’ your body clock and you’ll find yourself getting sleepy at about the same time every night.
- Don’t ignore tiredness. Go to bed when your body tells you it’s ready.
- Don’t go to bed if you don’t feel tired. You will only reinforce bad habits such as lying awake.
- Get enough early morning sunshine. Exposure to light during early waking hours helps to set your body clock.

Improve your sleeping environment

Good sleep is more likely if your bedroom feels restful and comfortable. Suggestions include:

- Invest in a mattress that is neither too hard nor too soft.
- Make sure the room is at the right temperature.
- Ensure the room is dark enough.
- If you can’t control noise (such as barking dogs or loud neighbours), buy a pair of earplugs.
- Use your bedroom only for sleeping and intimacy. If you treat your bed like a second lounge room – for watching television or talking to friends on the phone, for example – your mind will associate your bedroom with activity.

Avoid drugs

Some people resort to medications or ‘social drugs’ in the mistaken belief that sleep will be more likely. Common pitfalls include:

- Cigarettes – many smokers claim that cigarettes help them relax, yet nicotine is a stimulant. The side effects, including accelerated heart rate and increased blood pressure, are likely to keep you awake for longer.
- Alcohol – alcohol is a depressant drug, which means it slows the workings of the nervous system. Drinking before bed may help you doze off but, since alcohol disturbs the rhythm of sleep patterns, you won’t feel refreshed in the morning. Other drawbacks include waking frequently to go to the toilet and hangovers.
- Sleeping pills – drawbacks include daytime sleepiness, failure to address the causes of sleeping problems, and the ‘rebound’ effect – after a stint of using sleeping pills, falling asleep without them tends to be even harder. These drugs should only be used as a temporary last resort and under strict medical advice.

Relax your mind

Insomnia is often caused by worrying. Suggestions include:

- If you are a chronic bedtime worrier, try scheduling a half hour of ‘worry time’ well before bed. Once you retire, remind yourself that you’ve already done your worrying for the day.
- Try relaxation exercises. You could consciously relax every part of your body, starting with your toes and working up to your scalp. Or you could think of a restful scene, concentrate on the rhythmic rise and fall of your breathing, or focus on a mantra (repeating a word or phrase constantly).

General suggestions

Other lifestyle adjustments that may help improve your sleep include:

- Exercise every day, but not close to bedtime and try not to overheat yourself – your body needs time to wind down.

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• Try not to engage in mentally stimulating activities close to bedtime. Use the last hour or so before sleep to relax your mind.
• Don’t take afternoon naps.
• Avoid caffeinated drinks (like tea, coffee, cola or chocolate) close to bedtime. Instead, have a warm, milky drink, since milk contains a sleep-enhancing amino acid.
• Take a warm bath.
• Turn your alarm clock to the wall. Watching the minutes tick by is a sure way to keep yourself awake.
• If you can’t fall asleep within a reasonable amount of time, get out of bed and do something else for half an hour or so, such as reading a book.
• If you have tried and failed to improve your sleep, you may like to consider professional help. See your doctor for information and referral.

Where to get help

• Your doctor
• Sleep disorder clinic

Things to remember

• ‘Sleep hygiene’ means habits that help you have a good night’s sleep.
• Common sleeping problems (such as insomnia) are often caused by bad habits reinforced over years or even decades.
• If you have tried and failed to improve your sleep, you may like to consider professional help.

References

• Increasing your ZZZs, Student and Staff Services Counselling Centre, Adelaide University. More information here.
Sleep

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Sleep basics
- Children and sleep
- Sleep related conditions
- Managing sleep problems

Sleep basics

- Mood and sleep
  Getting enough sleep is vital. Long term sleep deficiency can affect your mood. You can improve your sleep quality...
- Shiftwork
  A person working the night shift is at greater risk of various disorders and accidents...
- Sleep deprivation
  A fatigued person is accident prone and more likely to make mistakes and bad decisions...
- Sleep explained
  Fatigue is thought to cause about one in six road accidents - make sure you get enough sleep...

Children and sleep

- Dummies
  Dummy sucking should stop before school age to avoid teeth or mouth problems...
- Sleep and your baby
  Sleeping habits are learned, so try to set up a bedtime routine for your baby as soon as you can...
- Sleep - children and naps
  A child needs a daytime nap until they are around two and a half to three years of age...
- Sleep - children and nightmares
  Your child may have only a few scary dreams a year, or be troubled by nightmares much more often...
- Teenagers and sleep
  Sleep research suggests that teenagers need between eight and 10 hours of sleep every night...
Sleep related conditions

- Teeth grinding
  Teeth grinding (bruxism) is involuntary clenching or grinding of the teeth, usually during sleep.

- Snoring
  Snoring isn't harmful but may lead to long-term sleep deprivation.

- Sleep - common disorders
  Sleep disorders can prevent some people from getting enough sleep.

- Sleep - hypersonnia
  Hypersonnia means excessive sleepiness - it can have a number of different causes.

- Sleep - narcolepsy
  A person with narcolepsy is extremely sleepy all the time and may fall asleep several times a day.

- Sleep - insomnia
  Around one in three people regularly have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

- Restless legs syndrome (RLS)
  Restless legs syndrome has been described as a type of cramp, soreness or a creeping, crawling feeling.

- Sleep apnoea
  A person with sleep apnoea may wake hundreds of times every night.

- Jet lag
  If you suffer badly from jet lag, it may be worthwhile considering a westerly travel route if possible.

Managing sleep problems

- Sleep hygiene
  You can retrain your body and mind so that you sleep well and wake feeling rested.

- Mood and sleep
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- Fatigue fighting tips
  Activity and nutrition help fight fatigue and put more energy into your daily life.

Related Information

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Related information on other websites

- WebMD - How to Sleep Better.

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This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Better Health Channel

Last updated: June 2014

Page content currently being reviewed.

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Page last reviewed: 30 Jun 2014


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