

## Tips for Better Sleep

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Many people have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or both. There are a few lucky people who just drop off to sleep as soon as their heads hit the pillow, but most of us need some time to wind down. Here are some tips for getting a good night's sleep:

Try these suggestions if you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep:

Go to bed and get up at about the same time every day, even on the weekends. Sticking to a schedule helps reinforce your body's sleep-wake cycle and can help you fall asleep better at night.

Don't eat or drink large amounts before bedtime. Eat a light dinner about two hours before sleeping. If you're prone to heartburn, avoid spicy or fatty foods, which can make your heartburn flare and prevent a restful sleep. Also, limit how much you drink before bed. Too much liquid can cause you to wake up repeatedly during the night for trips to the bathroom.

Avoid nicotine, caffeine and alcohol in the evening. These are stimulants that can keep you awake. Smokers often experience withdrawal symptoms at night, and smoking in bed is dangerous. Avoid caffeine for eight hours before your planned bedtime. Your body doesn't store caffeine, but it takes many hours to eliminate the stimulant and its effects. And although often believed to be a sedative, alcohol actually disrupts sleep.

Exercise regularly. Regular physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, can help you fall asleep faster and make your sleep more restful. Don't exercise within three hours of your bedtime, however. Exercising right before bed may make getting to sleep more difficult.

Make your bedroom cool, dark, quiet and comfortable. Create a room that's ideal for sleeping. Adjust the lighting, temperature, humidity and noise level to your preferences. Use blackout curtains, eye covers, earplugs, extra blankets, a fan, a humidifier or other devices to create an environment that suits your needs. Consider earplugs if you have a partner who snores or loud neighbours. This is particularly important if you are a shift worker and have to sleep when the sun is up.

Sleep primarily at night. Daytime naps may steal hours from nighttime slumber. Limit daytime sleep to about a half-hour and make it during mid-afternoon. If you work nights, keep your window coverings closed so that sunlight, which adjusts the body's internal clock, doesn't interrupt your sleep. If you have a day job and sleep at night, but still have trouble waking up, leave the window coverings open and let the sunlight help wake you up.

Choose a comfortable mattress and pillow. Features of a good bed are subjective and differ for each person. But make sure you have a bed that's comfortable. If you share your bed, make sure there's enough room for two. Children and pets are often disruptive, so you may need to set limits on how often they sleep in bed with you.

Start a relaxing bedtime routine. Do the same things each night to tell your body it's time to wind down. This may include taking a warm bath or shower, reading a book, or listening to soothing music. Relaxing activities done with lowered lights can help ease the transition between wakefulness and sleepiness.

Go to bed when you're tired and turn out the lights. If you don't fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, get up and do something else. Go back to bed when you're tired. Don't agonize over falling asleep. The stress will only prevent sleep.

Use sleeping pills only as a last resort. Check with your doctor before taking any sleep medications. He or she can make sure the pills won't interact with your other medications or with an existing medical condition. Your doctor can also help you determine the best dosage. If you do take a sleep medication, reduce the dosage gradually when you want to quit, and never mix alcohol and sleeping pills. If you feel sleepy or dizzy during the day, talk to your doctor about changing the dosage or discontinuing the pills.

If you're having problems sleeping more than three times a week for a month's time, see your doctor. You could have a sleep disorder, such as obstructive sleep apnea or restless legs syndrome. Identifying and treating the cause of your sleep disturbance can help get you back on the road to a good night's sleep.

