

Guidelines for a Good Night's Sleep

The following guidelines are recommended to help you improve both the quality and amount of your sleep.

1. Exercise regularly. Do not exercise close to bedtime because it will stimulate you and make it difficult for you to fall asleep. Experts suggest not exercising at least 3 hours before your bedtime.
2. Unwind yourself at least two hours before you go to bed. Avoid vigorous physical and mental activity (e.g. exercising, talking about emotional issues with your family, planning for next day's work) during this period.
3. Develop a sleep "ritual" before bedtime. This ritual can consist of a few activities that you do everyday before bedtime to signal to your body that you are getting ready to rest and go to bed. Helpful activities can include: Cleaning your teeth, putting on your pyjamas, having a warm bath, listening to relaxing music, doing relaxing activities (e.g. meditation, Yoga), and drinking sleep-enhancing beverages (e.g. warm milk, Horlicks).
4. Take a warm (not hot) bath before going to bed. Stay in the bath for at least 15 to 20 minutes.
5. Make your sleeping place comfortable. Ensure that it is dark, quiet, and not too warm or too cold. If light is a problem, try wearing an eye mask. If noise is a problem, try wearing earplugs or using "white noise" generators (e.g. a fan) that generate constant, low frequency sounds.
6. To strengthen the association between your bedroom (or bed) and sleep, avoid using your bedroom as a place of work. Eliminate all non sleep-related activities in bed (e.g. reading, watching TV, working on your laptop, talking with your partner about problems). ***Your bed should only be used for sleep or sex*** (Note: *Sex, when physically and emotionally satisfying, has been found to benefit sleep*).
7. Food and drinks. When and what you eat and drink can affect your sleep.
 - a. Maintain a well balanced diet. Note that food high in carbohydrates (e.g. bread, cereal) can make you feel sleepy, while food rich in protein (e.g. meat, nuts) can make you feel more alert.
 - b. Take your dinner several hours (e.g. 3 to 5 hours) before bedtime. Do not eat a heavy meal (especially high in protein and fat) late in the night. Heavy meals, especially when too close to your bedtime, will cause your digestive system to work during the night while you are sleeping, adversely affecting the quality of your sleep in the process.
 - c. Warm milk and Horlicks have been found to be helpful in inducing and improving sleep.
 - d. If you feel hungry at bedtime, a small *carbohydrate* snack (e.g. bread) can be helpful.
 - e. Avoid coffee, tea, and other sources of caffeine (e.g. chocolate, chocolate-flavoured drinks, soft drinks such as colas), at least 5 to 6 hours before bedtime.
 - f. Avoid alcoholic drinks in the evening. When you drink alcohol, the initial effect is relaxation, which can help you to get to sleep. However, the effects of alcohol wear off after a few hours, causing withdrawal symptoms, which result in awakenings during the night.
 - g. Avoid smoking in the evening. Nicotine, a stimulant, can make it more difficult for you to go to sleep.
8. For relaxing tense muscles or a racing mind during bedtime, try relaxation techniques (e.g. progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, breath-counting).

9. Do not go to bed until you feel sleepy. Contrary to popular advice, setting a rigid time to go to bed each night may *not* work very well for you if you are an insomniac. Having a fixed bedtime increases your anxiety and almost ensures you will not be able to go to sleep at that time. And if you go to bed before you feel sleepy, you are unlikely to fall asleep, which will result in your wasting time lying awake in bed, which in turn makes you more frustrated, irritated and more difficult to fall asleep. In general, it is a good idea to go to bed when you feel sleepy (e.g. yawning, eyes closing).
10. If unable to fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes of lying down, get up and do something else (e.g. read a boring book, drink a cup of warm milk). In this way, your body does not associate your bed with wakefulness. Do not return to bed until you feel sleepy. Once you feel sleepy again, go back to bed. If you cannot sleep, repeat the process.
11. Schedule your "Worry Time". Many people develop a bad habit of worrying during bedtime. If this sounds like you, it may help to actually set aside a short period of "worry time" (e.g. 20 to 30 minutes) during the day (preferably at least a few hours before your bedtime) to think over your problems. A paper and pen by your bedside can be helpful for you to write down your worries when they pop up during your bedtime; after writing them down, tell yourself that you will think and do something about them tomorrow during your "worry time".
12. Do have a fixed waking-up time. If you are an insomniac, getting up at the same time every day, even on weekends when you are tempted to sleep in, is helpful. It is even more effective if you can expose yourself to outside light soon after getting up, a very helpful way to reset your body's biological clock.
13. Daytime napping (about 10 – 15 minutes) can be helpful in reducing your daytime sleepiness and make it easier for you to get through the rest of the day. But avoid longer naps as they will interfere with your sleep at night.
14. If your partner snores, kicks, or tosses and turns, have separate beds at whatever distance is mutually acceptable. If mutually acceptable, it may help for partners to sleep in separate rooms for one to several nights a week to allow one or both parties to have quality sleep during those nights.
15. If you are a chronic "clock-watcher", it may help to hide your bedroom clock. Many people with insomnia turn into clock-watchers, becoming very anxious when the clock ticks by and they are still awake. If you need an alarm clock to wake you up in the morning, it may help to put the clock at a place where you cannot see it.
16. Do not worry if you cannot sleep. Do not let yourself be afraid of insomnia. Although this is easier said than done, the great paradox about sleep is that the harder you try to sleep, the more elusive it becomes. Instead, work on *accepting* those nights when your sleep is not as sound. In actual fact, you can still function the next day even if you had only a few hours of sleep. The less you worry, fight, resist or fear sleeplessness, the more it will tend to go away. Remind yourself that the worst that can happen if you sleep less than normal is that you will be sleepier the next day and will most likely recover some of this missed sleep in the next night or in future nights. The physical tiredness that insomniacs feel during the day can arise as much from constant worry about sleep than from the actual decrease of sleep itself.
17. Please consult your doctor if your insomnia continues to persist and your daily functioning is significantly affected by it.

Recommended Reading

"Insomnia: How To Sleep Easy" by Drs Leon Lack, Helen Wright & Helen Bearpark (The Singapore Women's Weekly Health Series, 2004; Available in all major bookshops).