

Sleep tips: 7 steps to better sleep

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You're not doomed to toss and turn every night. Consider simple tips for better sleep, from setting a sleep schedule to including physical activity in your daily routine.

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Feeling crabby lately? Or simply worn out? Perhaps the solution is better sleep.

Think about all the factors that can interfere with a good night's sleep — from pressure at work and family responsibilities to unexpected challenges, such as layoffs, relationship issues or illnesses. It's no wonder that quality sleep is sometimes elusive.

Although you might not be able to control all of the factors that interfere with your sleep, you can adopt habits that encourage better sleep. Start with these simple sleep tips.

No. 1: Stick to a sleep schedule

Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends, holidays and days off. Being consistent reinforces your body's sleep-wake cycle and helps promote better sleep at night. There's a caveat, though. If you don't fall asleep within about 15 minutes, get up and do something relaxing. Go back to bed when you're tired. If you agonize over falling asleep, you might find it even tougher to nod off.

No. 2: Pay attention to what you eat and drink

Don't go to bed either hungry or stuffed. Your discomfort might keep you up. Also limit how much you drink before bed, to prevent disruptive middle-of-the-night trips to the toilet.

Nicotine, caffeine and alcohol deserve caution, too. The stimulating effects of nicotine and caffeine — which take hours to wear off — can wreak havoc with quality sleep. And even though alcohol might make you feel sleepy at first, it can disrupt sleep later in the night.

No. 3: Create a bedtime ritual

Do the same things each night to tell your body it's time to wind down. This might include taking a warm bath or shower, reading a book, or listening to soothing music — preferably with the lights dimmed. Relaxing activities can promote better sleep by easing the transition between wakefulness and drowsiness.

Be wary of using the TV or other electronic devices as part of your bedtime ritual. Some research suggests that screen time or other media use before bedtime interferes with sleep.

No. 4: Get comfortable

Create a room that's ideal for sleeping. Often, this means cool, dark and quiet. Consider using room-darkening shades, earplugs, a fan or other devices to create an environment that suits your needs.

Your mattress and pillow can contribute to better sleep, too. Since the features of good bedding are subjective, choose what feels most comfortable to you. If you share your bed, make sure there's enough room for two. If you have children or pets, set limits on how often they sleep with you — or insist on separate sleeping quarters.

No. 5: Limit daytime naps

Long daytime naps can interfere with nighttime sleep — especially if you're struggling with insomnia or poor sleep quality at night. If you choose to nap during the day, limit yourself to about 10 to 30 minutes and make it during the midafternoon.

If you work nights, you'll need to make an exception to the rules about daytime sleeping. In this case, keep your window coverings closed so that sunlight — which adjusts your internal clock — doesn't interrupt your daytime sleep.

No. 6: Include physical activity in your daily routine

Regular physical activity can promote better sleep, helping you to fall asleep faster and to enjoy deeper sleep. Timing is important, though. If you exercise too close to bedtime, you might be too energized to fall asleep. If this seems to be an issue for you, exercise earlier in the day.

No. 7: Manage stress

When you have too much to do — and too much to think about — your sleep is likely to suffer. To help restore peace to your life, consider healthy ways to manage stress. Start with the basics, such as getting organized, setting priorities and delegating tasks. Give yourself permission to take a break when you need one. Share a good laugh with an old friend. Before bed, jot down what's on your mind and then set it aside for tomorrow.

Know when to contact your doctor

Nearly everyone has an occasional sleepless night — but if you often have trouble sleeping, contact your doctor. Identifying and treating any underlying causes can help you get the better sleep you deserve.