

Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene is a term used to describe good sleep habits. It is a variety of different steps we take to have quality nighttime sleep and full daytime alertness.

How do I know if my sleep hygiene is poor?

Consistent trouble sleeping (not just one or two nights) and daytime sleepiness are common signs of poor sleep hygiene. Poor sleep can be the result of stress, cancer treatment, certain medications, other medical problems (arthritis, headaches, chronic pain, etc) or can simply be the result of bad sleep habits that have built up over time. If you are having trouble sleeping, think about your sleep routine and practice the “Do’s” and “Dont’s” below.

* These tips usually work best when done together. It may take time for the tips to have a positive effect. Remember, everyone is different. Find out what is helpful to you and try to stick with it. You may need to change some of the tips below in order for them to fit your individual needs.

Here are some tips for practicing good sleep hygiene:

Do: Go to bed at the same time each night. The body has a “natural clock” and you will become sleepy when your body is ready for bed. Try not to ignore this by going to bed too early or too late.

Do: Get up at the same time each morning. Getting up at the same time help keeps your body “in sync” with the morning daylight and activity. If you can stick with a fairly regular waking and sleeping time, your body will get used to it. Avoid trying to “make up” for poor sleep by sleeping in. Yet, this doesn’t mean you can *never* sleep in – an occasional night out or sleep in is not harmful.

Do: Make your bedroom as restful as possible. This can include: keeping the temperature cool, keeping noises and outside light to a minimum, using soft sheets and blankets and putting distracting things such as beeping watches in another room.

Do: Be comfortable and relaxed. You spend a lot of time in bed and it is important to be comfortable. If you have uncomfortable pillows, mattress, blankets or pajamas replace them, if possible. If you are cold, warm the room or wear warmer pajamas. Warm hands and feet are important. A warm bath about an hour before bed caused body temperature to rise, which can help you fall asleep.

Do: Use your bed only for sleep and sex. The brain makes connections between places (the bedroom) and events (sleeping) and we need to reinforce these with our behavior. Some people use the bed for lots of activities (e.g., watching TV, reading, talking on the phone, etc) and it is helpful to avoid this. Make sure the bed is for sleeping and sleeping happens in the bed (not on the couch or in a chair).

Don’t: Share your bed with children or pets. Typically, parents sleeping with young children or pets sleep less and have more disrupted sleep.

Do: Understand how much sleep you need. Most people need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep each day, which includes naps and time dozing in a chair or in front of the TV. Don’t build up unrealistic expectations of your sleep needs (“I must sleep 9 hours every night!”).

Do: Establish a pre-bed routine that involves engaging in relaxing activities before bed. These activities may include: Taking a few minutes to sit quietly and breathe, listening to soft, calming music or taking a bath.

Do: Spend time outdoors or in natural light. Light helps the body produce melatonin which is a sleep promoting hormone. Sunlight early in the day is especially helpful in getting your natural clock “in sync” with natural daytime and nighttime (i.e., feeling alert during the day and sleepy at night).

Do: Take medications as prescribed. Prescription medications can make you feel alert or drowsy, depending on the medication and it is important to follow the instructions. Don’t change the time of day you take your medication.

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Do: Get regular exercise each day. Regular exercise improves restful sleep. Usually it is best to exercise in the morning or before dinner.

Don't: Exercise right before bed. Exercise stimulates the body and may make it difficult to fall asleep. Try to exercise earlier in the day.

Don't: Engage in stimulating activity right before bed. Activities such as playing a competitive game, watching a suspenseful movie or having an important conversation stimulate your mind and may make it difficult to “turn off your mind” and fall asleep.

Don't: Take your worries to bed. Practice taking a few minutes before bed to write down worries and/or tasks for the next day. Once these are written down, tell yourself, “They are on the paper and off my mind” and think about something relaxing (e.g., a beach, a park or a sunset) Remember, that you can look at the list of worries if needed.

Don't: Drink caffeinated drinks in the evening. Coffee, non-herbal tea and many sodas contain caffeine, which may stimulate you making it difficult to fall asleep. Read the label/bottle if you don't know if a drink has caffeine. If you often have to go to the bathroom during the night, don't drink too much before bed and go to bed with an empty bladder.

Don't: Go to bed too hungry or too full. Being too full or too hungry is physically uncomfortable which can make it difficult to fall asleep. Try not to eat large amounts of food before bed. However, a snack before bed, such as a warm glass of milk, cheese and crackers or fruit, may help you fall asleep.

Don't: Use alcohol to help you sleep. Alcohol can make it easier to fall asleep, but it can have negative effects over the course of the night including: making you need to urinate more frequently, causing you to wake up early, causing fragmented sleep and making snoring and sleep apnea worse.

Don't: Smoke. Nicotine is a stimulant and the effect of nicotine can contribute to poor sleep.

Don't: Use sleep medications to help you sleep: Sleep medications can be helpful in the *short-term*, but are often not as effective in the long-term. Some medications can cause you to feel sleepy during the day and when you stop taking them, they may cause a “rebound effect” making it more difficult to fall asleep. *If you would like to learn more about sleep medications, please talk with your medical provider.

Don't: Look at the clock all the time. Clocks with bright numbers are distracting and obsessing over the time, or how you are not sleeping, will make it more difficult to fall asleep.

Don't: Stay in bed if you are awake. You can't force yourself to sleep. If you don't fall asleep after 20 to 30 minutes, get up and do something boring (in another room). Try to keep the lighting low so that you don't stimulate yourself too much. When you are tired, go back to back. This also applies if you wake up in the night and can't fall back asleep.