

# 20 Tips for Better Sleep

## Ban Blue Light in the Bedroom

Insomnia feeds on the minor details of modern life, like the soft blue glow from a cell phone, PDA, or digital clock resting on your bedside table. The short waves of blue light may interfere with sleep.

**Tip:** Turn off TVs, computers, and other blue light producers an hour before sleep. Cover any blue displays you can't shut off.

## Avoid Naps

Napping makes matters worse if you have trouble falling asleep. But if you must nap, keep it brief, 20 minutes or less -- and do it early in the day. Any shut-eye within eight hours of your bedtime can sabotage a good night's sleep.

**Tip:** When an afternoon slump hits, go for a short walk, drink a glass of ice water, or call a friend.

## Block the Clock

When you glance at the clock in the wee hours of the night, your sleep will suffer. You worry about how few hours are left before your busy day begins. Clock watchers should put their alarm in a drawer, under the bed, or turn it away from view.

**Tip:** Use black tape for the blue LED digital clocks on the bedroom DVR.

## Try a Leg Pillow for Back Pain

Mild low back pain may not wake you, but it can disrupt the deep, restful stages of sleep. A cushy solution is to place a pillow between the legs for better alignment of the hips and reduced stress on the low back.

**Tip:** Back sleepers can tuck a pillow under their knees to help ease pain at night.

## Put Your Neck in Neutral

If you wake tired with a stiff neck, blame your pillow. Pillows that are too fat or too flat cause problems. Your pillow should be just the right size to support your neck in a neutral position. For side sleepers, the nose should align with the center of the body. Stomach sleeping twists the neck and is best avoided.

**Tip:** Keep your neck neutral before bed, too. Don't crane your neck to watch TV.

## Seal the Mattress

The sneezing, sniffing, and itching of allergies can cause fragmented sleep -- and your mattress may be to blame. Over time, it can fill with mold, dust mite droppings, and other allergy triggers. Avoid these sleep wreckers by sealing your mattress, box springs, and pillow.

**Tip:** Air-tight, plastic, dust proof covers work best.

## Reserve the Bed for Sleep and Sex

Experts say sleep and sex should be the only pastimes pursued in the bedroom. Don't balance the checkbook, talk on the phone, or watch TV. Everything about the room should be associated with rest and relaxation.

**Tip:** The best sleep temperature for most people is on the cool side--below 76 degrees.

## Set Your Body Clock

Go to sleep and wake up at about the same time every day -- including weekends. This routine will put your brain and body on a healthy sleep-wake cycle. In time, you'll be able to fall asleep quickly and sleep soundly through the night.

**Tip:** Get out in bright light for 5 to 30 minutes as soon as you rise. Light is the most powerful regulator of the biological clock.

## Cut the Caffeine

Coffee in the morning is fine for most people, but as soon as the clock strikes noon, avoid caffeine in foods and drinks. Caffeine interferes with the deeper stages of sleep, so even small amounts found in chocolate and decaffeinated coffee may impact your rest.

**Tip:** Read labels: Some pain relievers and weight loss pills contain caffeine.

## Exercise Right, Time It Right

Regular exercise has been shown to improve sleep quality, as long as you don't work out too close to bedtime. A post-workout burst of energy can keep you awake. Aim to finish any vigorous exercise 3 to 4 hours before you hit the hay.

**Tip:** Gentle mind/body exercises are fine just before sleep. Yoga, tai chi, and similar routines are a perfect, sleep-inducing nightcap.

## Eat Right at Night

Avoid heavy foods and big meals late in the day; they tax the digestive system and make it hard to get high-quality sleep. Some people do well with a light evening snack of sleep-inducing foods. Complex carbs and dairy foods fill the bill, such as cereal with milk or crackers and cheese.

**Tip:** Finish any snack at least an hour before bed.

## Rethink Your Drink

Although the tranquilizing effects of alcohol may make you sleepy at bedtime, beware -- after the initial effects wear off, alcohol actually causes more frequent awakenings at night and less restful sleep.

**Tip:** Warm milk or chamomile tea are better beverage choices in the evening.

## Stop Sipping After 8 pm

Treat yourself like a child: Nothing to drink within two hours of bedtime. It'll help prevent those sleep-wrecking middle-of-the-night bathroom trips. And it can be difficult to get back to sleep quickly after hitting the cold bathroom floor.

**Tip:** Keep a nightlight in the bathroom to avoid bright light at night.

## Lower the Lights

Starting two to three hours before bedtime, dim the lights around the house and put aside any work, arguments, or complicated decisions. It takes time to turn off the emotional and intellectual "noise" of the day. Lowering the lights signals your brain to produce melatonin, the hormone that brings on sleep.

**Tip:** Use a 15-watt bulb when reading in the last hour before bed.

## Neutralize Noise

A dripping faucet, a child's cough, or a barking dog can add up to big-time sleep loss. And parents may be hypersensitive to noises in the night long after children outgrow the baby stage.

**Tip:** Soothing "white noise" covers up bumps in the night. You can use a fan, an air-conditioner, or a white noise generator available in stores. Ear plugs also work.

## Skip the Smoke

Need another reason to quit smoking? Nicotine is a stimulant, just like caffeine. Smoking can keep you from falling asleep and worsen insomnia.

**Tip:** While you're planning your quit strategy, you may sleep a little better if you smoke fewer cigarettes in the four hours before bed.

## Keep Pets Off the Bed

A cat or dog's night moves can prevent you from settling into the deep sleep you crave. They can also bring fleas, fur, dander, and pollen to your bed, triggering sleep-wrecking allergies.

**Tip:** Ask your vet or animal trainer how to recondition your pet to sleep, happily, in its own bed.

## Free Your Mind at Bedtime

Establish a "winding down" period in the evenings about an hour before bedtime. Read something calm, meditate, listen to music, or take a warm bath. Try making a list of any worries, along with a plan to deal with them, to bring closure to your day.

**Tip:** Even a 10-minute pre-sleep ritual may help when time is short.

## Use Caution with Sleeping Pills

Sleeping pills may be tempting on those nights when sleep just isn't coming, but exercise caution. Some sleep medicines can be habit forming and may have bothersome side effects. Ideally, they should be used as a very short-term solution, while other lifestyle and behavior changes are put in place.

## When Insomnia Means Something More

Sleep tips are nice when your insomnia is fleeting. But if your sleeplessness persists for at least a month, it's time to delve deeper into what's going on. Insomnia may be a symptom of an underlying problem. Depression is notorious for causing insomnia, as are other medical conditions, such as acid reflux, asthma, arthritis, and some medications. Chronic insomnia deserves a closer look and evaluation by a doctor.

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