

What to do Today to Sleep Better Tonight

Repay Your Debt

The lack of enough sleep over time can result in a sleep debt. This is the difference between the amount of sleep you need and the amount you actually get. This debt can be repaid by tacking on extra snooze time each night until you feel caught up.

Exercise by Day to Sleep at Night

Regular exercise can help you sleep better. For best results, exercise outside before dinner. But don't rev up with exercise near bedtime. In the evening, light yoga or stretches can help you wind down. If you have a medical problem or are over 50 check with your doctor before starting an exercise routine.

Choose Evening Snacks Wisely

An oatmeal raisin cookie and a glass of milk can help you fall asleep. That's because this snack includes complex carbs that likely increase levels of sleep-inducing amino acid tryptophan. Other sleep-boosting choices: a piece of whole grain toast or a small bowl of cereal.

Get on a Sleep Schedule

The average person needs 7-9 hours of sleep per night. Most experts recommend maintaining a consistent sleep schedule even on days when you are able to sleep in. This balances a person's internal clock, allowing them to stay awake when needed and fall asleep when ready. It helps if your bedroom is conducive to sleep: dark, cool, and quiet.

Wind Down Your Brain

Try blocking out a daily "worry time" to get anxiety out of your system before bed. Make time just after dinner to plan your next day, catch up on email, and tie up loose ends. Then you can have time before bed to let go of anxieties and relax.

If You Nap, Keep it Short

Whether you should nap during the day depends on how you normally sleep at night. If you typically sleep well, then an occasional short nap is OK. Naps can make you function better, lower blood pressure, and maybe even help you live longer. Avoid napping too late in the day, as it might affect your nighttime sleep. But if you have sleep problems, naps may mess up your sleep schedule even more.

Avoid Hidden Sleep Wreckers

Caffeine can perk you up so avoid it after lunch if you have trouble sleeping at night. It can stay in your system for an average of three to five hours, but some people are affected as long as 12 hours. Watch your afternoon food and drink choices. Caffeine may hide in soft drinks, tea, and chocolate. Also be wary of certain medications, such as decongestants, which can aggravate sleep problems.

Natural Ways to Help You Sleep

Some people try natural methods to wind down their day. Used medicinally for thousands of years, chamomile brewed in tea is non-caffeinated and may help relax you for sleep. Or try aromatherapy. Studies have found that

lavender produces slight relaxing and calming effects when inhaled. For some people, melatonin seems to improve sleep. If you take medications, talk with your doctor before taking any supplement.

Try Relaxation Exercises

In the late evening, visualize something calming, using all your senses to make the image as vivid as possible. Or try progressive muscle relaxation. Tighten up the muscles in your toes for several seconds. Then relax them for 30 seconds. Focus on how relaxed they feel. Repeat this all the way up your body, ending at your neck and face.

When You're in Pain

Are aches and pains keeping you up at night? You're not alone: According to one survey, three-quarters of people with low back pain experienced poor sleep. And if you can't sleep well, you may feel even worse during the day. First, make sure you practice good sleep hygiene. You may want to consider taking a nighttime pain reliever to help you doze off, but consult your doctor if pain commonly keeps you up at night.

See a Doctor About Sleep Problems

If you have sleep problems and none of these strategies helps, you may have a sleep disorder. Medications and some medical conditions can cause sleep problems. Your doctor or a sleep specialist can help you find the problem and learn ways to improve sleep.

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