

# Will a Gadget Help You Sleep?

Sleep apps, alarm clocks, white noise machines, sleep monitors, and more.

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You can't sleep, so you turn on the white noise machine, slip on an eye mask, and spritz some lavender spray into the air. Will you nab some shut-eye now? Maybe -- but maybe not.

We crave sleep, and yet most of us don't get enough of it. Those who try often don't get a quality snooze. In fact, 43% of Americans between the ages of 13 and 64 say they rarely or never get a good night's sleep on weeknights, according to a recent poll by the National Sleep Foundation.

Many people look to gadgets to help them get their ZZZs, but fun as they might be, they're no substitute for good sleep habits like going to bed at the same time every night, minimizing caffeine, and relaxing before bedtime.

"Gadgets can be helpful, but their effectiveness does not supersede sleep awareness and good sleep and circadian hygiene," says Gianluca Tosini, MD, director of the Circadian Rhythm and Sleep Disorders Program at the Neuroscience Institute and chairman of the department of pharmacology at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta.

Still, some devices can help, or at least trigger a sleep-inducing effect. Here's a look at some of the high- and low-tech gadgets and devices that can promote sound sleep.

## Shut Out the Noise

For most people, a quiet room is essential to a good night's sleep. But getting that peace and quiet isn't always easy. Here are some gadgets that might help:

- **White noise machines and apps.** Whether it's the sounds of rain, the crackle of thunder, or the pounding of horse's hooves, white noise can help you tune out the sounds that can disrupt sleep. "White noise is ideal to help block noise," says Shelby Freedman Harris, PsyD, director of the Behavioral Sleep Medicine Program Sleep-Wake Disorders Center at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. Harris says she prefers machines to apps because the noise on machines is gentler.
- **Music.** Playing music that relaxes you may promote better sleep. Helene Emsellem, MD, director of the Center for Sleep and Wake Disorders in Bethesda, Md., and author of *Snooze or Lose: 10 No-War Ways to Improve Your Teen's Sleep Habits*, recommends creating a playlist on your MP3 player of soothing songs, be it hard rock, the blues or jazz -- whatever relaxes you.
- **Ear plugs.** They're cheap and easy, and they actually work, experts say. "I have many patients who use earplugs to block the noise of snoring bed partners," Harris says. "Silicone earplugs are often better at blocking noise than the usual foam ones."

## Know Your Sleep

In a society that craves information, some people want to know exactly how well they're sleeping. That's where sleep monitors come in. These devices can tell you what stage of sleep you're in at 3 a.m., exactly how much sleep you're getting, and the best time to get up.

Knowing your patterns can help you structure the time you get up so you aren't awakened during a deep sleep, Emsellem says. "But you have to have an idea why you want that information."

For instance, if you're someone who frequently wakes up feeling unrefreshed, these devices may help you understand why.

But before you buy one of these gadgets, which can cost several hundred dollars, try going to bed at the same time every night and getting up at the same time every morning, Emsellem says. These sleep monitors are different from sleep wristbands, for example, which give you an idea of how much you sleep, but can't tell you how deep your sleep is.

## A Proper Awakening

For some people, rising isn't exactly a shining moment. Enter smart alarm clocks that will get you out of bed in a way that suits your waking style.

If you're prone to hitting the snooze button and oversleeping, you might want to consider alarm clocks that force you to get out of bed to turn them off.

"These are very novel and are effective for people who shut off their alarms and do not remember them going off," says Robert Oexman, DC, director of the Sleep to Live Institute in Joplin, Mo. "The amount of time it takes to shut off their alarm from across the room will allow sufficient time to wake up."

But if you prefer a gentle nudge, you might consider an alarm clock that rouses you with nature sounds or that light up gradually and mimic the sunrise. "Some patients feel more comfortable with gradual light and are traumatized by abrupt light," Emsellem says. "If you have a 5:30 wake-up time, having the light come on gradually can be relief."

If you're the type who hates being roused from a deep sleep, consider a watch or clock that monitors your movement and wakes you up when you're not in a deep sleep. "People often report waking up at the conclusion of a dream and not during the dream," Oexman says.

## All in the Ambience

A comfortable room goes a long way toward good sleep. Among the ways to create more comfort:

- **Lavender.** For years, lavender has been touted as a relaxing scent that can induce sleep. A 2005 study at Wesleyan University found that people who took a sniff of lavender got

better sleep than people who smelled distilled water. “The reason this works is poorly understood, but it may act as a relaxant prior to sleep,” Oxeman says. He recommends using lavender-scented bath salts, shampoo or lotions, or burning lavender incense 30 minutes before bedtime. Not a fan of lavender? Find a scent that does soothe you, Emsellem says.

- **Eye masks.** Too much light suppresses the production of melatonin, a hormone essential to initiating and maintaining sleep, Oxeman says. “Eye masks are a great tool in eliminating light sources - such as external light and lights from alarm clocks and night lights -- and increasing quality of sleep,” he says. “Eye masks are a great therapy when traveling and staying in rooms where light sources cannot be controlled.” Just make sure to use one that fits comfortably. “If it’s uncomfortable, it’s more likely to have an opposite effect,” Tosini says.
- **Room colors.** When it comes to sleep, certain colors are definitely more soothing than others. “The bedroom should be a calming and inviting environment,” Harris says. “The best colors for this include soft blues and purples, and warm neutrals.” If you like bright colors such as yellow, go for a softer shade, which can be more calming, she says.

#### SOURCES:

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Shelby Freedman Harris, PsyD, director, Behavioral Sleep Medicine Program Sleep-Wake Disorders Center, Montefiore Medical Center, New York.

Robert Oxeman, DC, director, Sleep to Live Institute, Joplin, Mo.

Gianluca Tosini, MD, director, Circadian Rhythm and Sleep Disorders Program, Neuroscience Institute; chairman, department of pharmacology, Morehouse School of Medicine, Atlanta.

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