

Rest and Sleep

Rest and refreshing sleep are essential to good health. Sound sleep provides a total release from the pressures of everyday life. Few people get through life without experiencing some difficulty with sleep patterns.

Sleep is controlled from a regulating center deep in the brain. It processes information from all parts of the body as well as the higher thought centers of the brain, or cerebral cortex. A low level of stimulation induces sleep, while a high level of stimulation leads to wakefulness. A calm mind and body are necessary for satisfying sleep.

Sleep goes in cycles. The first main cycle is quiet sleep which is true rest, with a quiet brain. It lasts about an hour. This is followed by rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is a shorter cycle of roughly 20-30 minutes. This is dreamtime, and the brain is active.

The average sleep needed for an adult is 7 ½ hours—approximately five complete cycles. Individual patterns vary widely according to age, health, and personality.

A Good Sleep Plan

If you are having difficulty sleep, try the following strategies and give yourself time to reestablish a refreshing sleep pattern. Let your family and friends know your plans—if you share a bed, your partner will need to know.

- For the duration of sleep retraining, establish regular times to go to bed and get up in the morning. Never go to bed earlier or get up later than these appointed times.
- Make your bedroom a stress-free zone—no television, telephone, noisy clock, personal computer, or radio to stimulate your brain.
- Small changes, such as new bed linens or moving the bed, can help start a new routine and break old associations.
- Soft, low lighting creates a restful atmosphere.
- Use the bed only for sleeping—no reading, eating, writing letters, talking on the phone, etc.
- Sexual activity is the only exception. Satisfying sex is a powerful prelude to relaxed sleep.
- Avoid rich, heavy, or late-night dinners or foods high in monosodium glutamate (often found in Chinese food) at the end of the day.
- Cut out coffee, strong tea, and soft drinks with caffeine for a month (try decaf or caffeine free drinks). Gradually reintroduce it, and even then avoid it after 4:00 p.m. If you're a heavy coffee drinker, be ready for withdrawal symptoms—headaches, irritability, and shakiness. Drink plenty of water.
- Avoid watching television news and talk radio for a month as well—watch light or funny programs or movies instead. Reduce extremes of positive (late night movies) as well as negative (arguments) stimulation 3 to 4 hours before bed.

- Exercise helps reduce stress and induce sleep. If possible, exercise within 4 to 5 hours before bedtime.
- Have a warm, not hot, bath or shower before bed. Oil of lavender is an age-old remedy for relaxing mind and body. Add drops to the bath water or on the corner of your pillow.
- Cut out daytime naps. Daytime “tiredness” is often the result of boredom or lack of activity. Go for a walk instead of snoozing.
- Try warm milk as a nightcap. Milk has high levels of tryptophan, a naturally occurring enzyme that the body digests and converts into serotonin. This “sleep nectar” has a powerful influence on promoting good moods and sound sleep.
- Sedative herbal teas such as passionflower and chamomile are safe alternatives for those who don’t like milk.
- Write a list of things to be remembered or done the following day so you don’t worry about tomorrow today. Constantly projecting into the future (or past) is certain to make sleep more difficult.
- Avoid going to bed angry.

Getting to Sleep

Sleep-retraining takes between 2 and 6 weeks to start working. The following regime has proven to be successful in helping to restore refreshing, drug-free sleep. You can also apply this approach if you wake up during the night.

- Once in bed and ready to sleep, lie on your back and practice low, slow abdominal breathing (through your nose) and relaxation techniques. Check your body for any tense areas and stretch and release the tension.
- Lie in a comfortable position (usually on the left side to start). Notice what time it is.
- If after 15 minutes you are still awake, get out of bed. Go into another room and do something else (read, watch funny video, play a card game, listen to soothing music).
- When you feel ready for sleep, go back to bed, and if again you are not asleep within 15 minutes, repeat the sequence until you go to sleep.

People who go to bed expecting not to sleep are often proven right. The good news is your poor sleep patterns can be changed—and a refreshing one restored. If you continue to have problems with your sleep, consult a sleep specialist for assistance.