

Sleep hygiene

'Sleep hygiene' means habits that help you to have a good night's sleep. Common sleeping problems (such as insomnia) are often caused by bad habits reinforced over years or even decades. You can dramatically improve your sleep quality by making a few minor adjustments to lifestyle and attitude.

Obey your body clock

The body's alternating sleep-wake cycle is controlled by an internal 'clock' within the brain. Most bodily processes (such as temperature and brain states) are synchronised to this 24-hour physiological clock. Getting a good sleep means working with your body clock, not against it. Suggestions include:

- Get up at the same time every day. Soon this strict routine will help to 'set' your body clock and you'll find yourself getting sleepy at about the same time every night.
- Don't ignore tiredness. Go to bed when your body tells you it's ready.
- Don't go to bed if you don't feel tired. You will only reinforce bad habits such as lying awake.
- Get enough early morning sunshine. Exposure to light during early waking hours helps to set your body clock.

Improve your sleeping environment

Good sleep is more likely if your bedroom feels restful and comfortable. Suggestions include:

- Invest in a mattress that is neither too hard nor too soft.
- Make sure the room is at the right temperature.
- Ensure the room is dark enough.
- If you can't control noise (such as barking dogs or loud neighbours), buy a pair of earplugs.
- Use your bedroom only for sleeping and intimacy. If you treat your bed like a second lounge room – for watching television or talking to friends on the phone, for example – your mind will associate your bedroom with activity.

Avoid drugs

Some people resort to medications or 'social drugs' in the mistaken belief that sleep will be more likely. Common pitfalls include:

- **Cigarettes** – many smokers claim that cigarettes help them relax, yet nicotine is a stimulant. The side effects, including accelerated heart rate and increased blood pressure, are likely to keep you awake for longer.
- **Alcohol** – alcohol is a depressant drug, which means it slows the workings of the nervous system. Drinking before bed may help you doze off but, since alcohol disturbs the rhythm of sleep patterns, you won't feel refreshed in the morning. Other drawbacks include waking frequently to go to the toilet and hangovers.
- **Sleeping pills** – drawbacks include daytime sleepiness, failure to address the causes of sleeping problems, and the 'rebound' effect – after a stint of using sleeping pills, falling asleep without them tends to be even harder. These drugs should only be used as a temporary last resort and under strict medical advice.

Relax your mind

Insomnia is often caused by worrying. Suggestions include:

- If you are a chronic bedtime worrier, try scheduling a half hour of 'worry time' well before bed. Once you retire, remind yourself that you've already done your worrying for the day.
- Try relaxation exercises. You could consciously relax every part of your body, starting with your toes and working up to your scalp. Or you could think of a restful scene, concentrate on the rhythmic rise and fall of your breathing, or focus on a mantra (repeating a word or phrase constantly).

General suggestions

Other lifestyle adjustments that may help improve your sleep include:

- Exercise every day, but not close to bedtime and try not to overheat yourself – your body needs time to wind down.
- Try not to engage in mentally stimulating activities close to bedtime. Use the last hour or so before sleep to relax your mind.
- Don't take afternoon naps.
- Avoid caffeinated drinks (like tea, coffee, cola or chocolate) close to bedtime. Instead, have a warm, milky drink, since milk contains a sleep-enhancing amino acid.
- Take a warm bath.
- Turn your alarm clock to the wall. Watching the minutes tick by is a sure way to keep yourself awake.
- If you can't fall asleep within a reasonable amount of time, get out of bed and do something else for half an hour or so, such as reading a book.
- If you have tried and failed to improve your sleep, you may like to consider professional help. See your doctor for information and referral.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Sleep disorder clinic

Things to remember

- 'Sleep hygiene' means habits that help you have a good night's sleep.
- Common sleeping problems (such as insomnia) are often caused by bad habits reinforced over years or even decades.
- If you have tried and failed to improve your sleep, you may like to consider professional help.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Newcastle Sleep Disorders Centre

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