

# Start to sleep better ..... zzzzzzzzzz

## *Get rid of sleep disruptors*

### **Limit or avoid caffeine and other stimulants**

Caffeine - found in coffee, cola, tea and even chocolate - is a stimulant. It stays active in the body for at least four and up to eight hours. It is best not to drink any drinks containing caffeine after 2 pm.

If you are stressed in general, cutting down on your caffeine intake or cutting it out altogether is a good idea.

### **Avoid watching television an hour before bed**

Television keeps your attention with fast moving images that stimulate the brain.

### **Avoid bright lights in the evening**

Bright lights in the evening can interfere with the production of the sleep hormone "melatonin" so try and stay away from bright lights at least an hour before bedtime. This includes computer screens and backlit devices as well as bright overhead lights.

### **Eat light and eat early**

Avoid foods that cause indigestion and eat your evening meal around three hours before bedtime. Otherwise your body will be digesting the food as you are trying to fall asleep. Try and avoid processed food which contains sugar as sugar stimulates the body. If you get hungry at night, snack on foods that, based on your own experience, won't disturb your sleep.

### **Balance fluid intake**

Drink enough fluid at night to keep you from waking up thirsty—but not so much and so close to bedtime that a full bladder will wake you up during the night.

### **Exercise early**

Exercise is good for your health and reduces stress. If it is done at the right time it can help you fall asleep faster and sleep more soundly. If you exercise too close to bedtime your adrenaline levels will be high and your core body temperature will be raised. This will keep you awake. Exercise during the daytime or the early evening aiming to finish exercising three hours before bedtime. Walking more is an easy way to increase exercise.

### **Additional suggestions re stress and anxiety**

Avoid stressful, stimulating activities in the evening e.g. work, discussing emotional issues as these will produce stress hormones. Stress hormones and a mind racing with worries will keep you awake. Reducing your stress and anxiety is likely to have a positive effect on your sleep. Speaking to a counsellor or following a self-help programme to reduce stress and anxiety can be beneficial. If you tend to take your problems to bed, try writing them down—and then putting them aside.

## *Improve sleep enhancers*

### **Make sure your bed and your bedroom are comfortable**

Your bed and pillows need to be comfortable

You need enough bedding so that you are warm enough to cope with the drop in body temperature that happens during the night.

Your bedroom needs to be the right temperature at around 18° Celsius, comfortably cool rather than warm.

Your room should be well aired so it isn't stuffy.

If you are disturbed by noise, mask the noise with "white noise" soundtracks or use earplugs

### **Control light levels**

Keep your bedroom as dark as possible, as light is a powerful cue that tells the brain that it's time to wake up. You might want to wear eye shades if you can't make your bedroom as dark as you would like with blinds or heavy curtains.

### **Create a relaxing bedtime routine**

Allow your body and mind to relax in preparation for bed. Give yourself an hour before bedtime to "wind down" and relax. You could:

Take a warm bath: this can relax you although you need to have a bath a little while before bedtime to give your body time to cool down. It's the rise then the fall in core body temperature that promotes drowsiness.

Listen to relaxation audio aids on your phone or tablet (check out an App called [Breathe2Relax](#) which has a great demonstration of "belly breathing" as well as breathing exercises and before and after stress rating scales so you can track the effect of the breathing exercises. Good explanations of how stress affects breathing and vice versa too)

an App called [Calm](#) has some relaxing guided meditations too. You can access a relaxation track "Calm - ease mental tension". Tap the "meditate" button, then "guided", then "calm". You can then choose between 2 and 5 minute tracks.

Another App called [Take a Break](#) (free version) has a short guided meditation for stress relief

Listen to relaxing music

Read a book or magazine

Do this somewhere other than bed.

The idea of these relaxing activities is to relax you so that when you go to bed, your body is more ready for sleep.

## *Synch your body clock*

Two independent systems are involved in our sleep-wake cycle. One is the system which produces the "sleep drive", a desire and need for sleep which increases every hour that we are awake. The other is our "internal biological clock" which is influenced by light exposure. It has an "alerting system" which counteracts the sleep drive during the day. The alerting system drops off its signals mid-evening allowing the sleep drive to take effect. Our internal biological clock also starts producing the sleep hormone "melatonin" in anticipation of darkness. Melatonin produces drowsiness and together with the sleep drive helps us go to and stay asleep. Blue light (which computers and TVs emit) and bright lights suppress the production of melatonin.

### **Use light to your advantage**

Natural light keeps your internal clock synchronised to a healthy sleep-wake cycle i.e. to the environmental cycle of day and night. So let in the light first thing in the morning and get out into sunlight during the day. 30-60 minutes of daily daylight exposure "anchors" your internal clock, so it is less easily affected by other factors.

### **Keep to a regular sleep schedule**

Go to bed at a set time and however you sleep, set your alarm for the same wake-up time whether it's a weekday or the weekend.

Waking up at the same time every morning ensures three things:

1. That you're going to have a certain amount of sleep deprivation when you go to bed the following night. So even if you didn't sleep well the night before, the extra sleep drive will encourage better sleep the following night.
2. A certain amount of light exposure. Bright light seems to stimulate the system. Then, as we approach bedtime and we start dimming our lights our body becomes more ready to go to sleep.
3. We're having a certain amount of energy expenditure during the course of the day. The drop off in energy expenditure at night is then a very clear cue to the body to get ready to go to bed

Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day sets the body's "internal clock" to expect sleep at a certain time night after night.

### **Avoid lie-ins**

Avoid lie-ins at the weekends if you can as disruptions to your regular sleep schedule work in the opposite way: your sleep drive won't be at its peak at your next bedtime, you won't have had the same exposure to light for your body to know it's time to start decreasing its alerting system and you won't have the advantage of the effect of energy expenditure. Neither will your internal clock establish a set rhythm.

### **Limit napping**

If you are very tired it is tempting to take naps in the afternoon. If you nap longer than 20 minutes you will go into a deeper sleep and this will lower your sleep drive for night-time sleep. It will make it harder for your body to learn to sleep at regular times. If you must nap do this before 5 pm and follow the 20 minute rule - never nap for more than 20 minutes.

## *Create a strong association between bed and sleep*

### **Keep your bed for sleep and listening to Audio Sleep Aids (apps or CDs)**

Avoid watching TV in bed - if you can't remove the TV from your bedroom, you could unplug it / cover it to get rid of the temptation

Try not to read in bed or snack in bed

Avoid working in bed (ideally in your room)

### **If you are not sleeping within 20 minutes, get out of bed**

Struggling to sleep just leads to frustration. If your mind is taking over, this will stimulate you further where it will be more difficult to unwind. Lying in bed awake will prevent you developing a good association between bed and sleep. So if you are not sleeping within 20 minutes, get out of bed, ideally go to another room, and engage in a quiet, restful activity such as reading or listening to calming music, until you are tired enough to sleep. Avoid stimulating activities and keep the light dim so you don't wake further.

Similarly if you go to sleep but wake up during the night and can't get back to sleep within 20 minutes, the same guidelines apply.

### **OR use audio sleep aids**

If you are not sleepy at your bedtime or if you wake up during the night, you might want to experiment with different audio sleep aids, e.g. an App called "iSleep Easy" (the free version has sleep affirmations, breathing meditation for sleep and a Relax into Sleep meditation). Following a relaxing period, this meditation or similar has a good chance of making you feel sleepy.

### **Don't Be a Night-time Clock-Watcher**

Staring at a clock in your bedroom, either when you are trying to fall asleep or when you wake in the middle of the night, can increase stress and frustration, making it harder to fall asleep. Turn your clock's face away from you.

***IMPORTANT NOTE: If any of these relaxations or meditations produce uncomfortable physical or emotional sensations, please do not continue to use them.***

Some of these guidelines will be easier to follow than others but if you stick with them your chances of achieving restful sleep will improve. Not all sleep problems are so easily treated though and could mean the presence of a sleep disorder. If your sleep difficulties don't improve through having a good sleep routine, please see your doctor.