



Information for Patients

SLEEP HABITS



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Having healthy sleep habits plays an important role in achieving refreshing sleep, which in turn will help you to feel more alert when awake. Please note that not all of these hints are relevant to everybody – choose and adapt the hints that are most appropriate for you.

Treat medical problems that may affect your sleep. such as asthma, heart-burn and indigestion, angina, arthritis, pain, breathlessness, anxiety and depression. Discuss these issues with your GP to ensure that your treatment is optimal.

Ensure that you don't have a sleep disorder. Conditions such as obstructive sleep apnoea, restless legs syndrome and periodic limb movement disorder can disrupt your sleep and cause daytime tiredness. Discuss these issues with your GP, who may refer you for a sleep study or to see a Sleep Physician.

Ensure you get enough sleep. Most humans need between 7 and 8 hours of sleep per night. Insufficient sleep can cause sleep deprivation which impairs health, immunity, and emotional functioning.

Have a regular sleep schedule. You should try and retire to bed and rise in the morning at the same time each day. This promotes a healthy rhythm for your body's biological clock, making you more alert during the day, and promoting restful sleep at night.

Avoid day-time naps. Sleeping during the day can be detrimental to your body's natural clock. A need for long day-time naps (except in the elderly) indicate a sleep disorder. Some people find 'power naps' (that is, naps of 5–10 minutes) helpful, however, take care that you do not nap for longer than this.

Avoid consuming caffeine in the late afternoon and at night-time. Caffeine has a half-life of around 6 hours (this means that it takes around 6 hours for your body to metabolise just one-half of the caffeine in tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks and chocolate).

Avoid excessive nocturnal alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a sedative and is known to make snoring, obstructive sleep apnoea and limb movement disorders (such as RLS and PLMD) more severe. Even small amounts of alcohol at night-time can cause shallow and fragmented sleep and frequent awakenings. Alcohol also causes tachycardia (heart racing) and sweating, which can be uncomfortable during sleep.

Learn the habit of lateral sleep. Learning to sleep on your side will often reduce snoring and other airway-related breathing disorders.

Don't go to bed too early. If you feel that you are going to bed too early, (and it is taking a long time to get to sleep), try going to bed 15 minutes later each night for a week. Alternatively, you could also try getting up 15 minutes earlier in the morning (but not too early).

Switch off your mobile phone. Either switch your mobile off or into 'silent' mode so that you are not disturbed during the night (and to avoid the temptation to send messages or play games during the night).



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Reduce environmental factors that disrupt sleep. This includes bright or flashing lights, external noise, an uncomfortable bed, extremes of temperature.

Keep the bed to yourself. Don't allow pets or children into your bed (allowing children to sleep in your bed is highly discouraged).

Exercise regularly. Daily moderate exercise improves your sleep and your overall mental and physical health. Avoid exercising in the 2 hours before bed, as exercise releases hormones that promote wakefulness.

Avoid large meals before bed. Avoid meals that are high in protein at night-time, as high-protein foods can promote wakefulness. Meals that are high in complex carbohydrates are best (whole meal pasta, rice, etc). Drinks such as Ovaltine (which contains malt) with milk (which contains tryptophan) may help induce sleep.

Have a hot shower or bath before bed. This often helps people wind down and relax. Sleep is linked to body temperature (we tend to fall asleep as our body temperature begins to fall).

Enjoy the morning sunlight. Sunlight helps our body's natural way of regulating our sleep-wake cycle.

Have a regular evening routine. Such as washing, brushing teeth, changing into night-clothes and winding down – this trains your body into preparing for sleep.

Avoid worrying about how little or long you are sleeping. It is often advantageous to hide the clock.

Manage stress and worry. If you find you are kept awake by worrying about things, write the problem down on a piece of paper and then 'forget about it' until the next day.

Use relaxation techniques in bed. Imagine pleasant scenes (of rhythmic stimuli such as waves gently rolling in), enjoy pleasant day-dreaming, or listen to relaxing sounds or music.

Keep a diary. Record time spent asleep and awake, and try to match the time you spend in bed to the length of time you sleep.

Release tension. Find a way to release emotional tension, excessive stimulation and arousal during the day.

Avoid smoking at night-time. Nicotine is a stimulant and may interfere with your sleep. Also, having cigarette breaks at night-time disrupts your sleep cycles. Remember that smoking worsens the severity of snoring and obstructive sleep apnoea by causing the lining of the airways to swell. As a long-term measure, consider reducing (or ideally quitting) smoking.

Use your bed only for sleep and intimacy. You should avoid the habit of watching TV, playing computer games, or taking work into your bed. Use your bed only for rest (including reading), sleep and intimacy.