



THE IMPORTANCE OF SLEEP

Sleep is as essential to you as food, air, and water. Yet sometime in your life you may experience difficulty in sleeping (about one in three adults report some degree of insomnia at any one time). If you do have trouble sleeping, several changes in lifestyle can help you regain a satisfactory sleep pattern. Experiment with these helpful strategies offered here.

FIVE BASIC STRATEGIES

1. Never Oversleep

Never oversleep because of a poor night's sleep. This is the most crucial rule. Get up at about the same time every day, especially on the morning after you've lost sleep. Sleeping late for just a couple of days can reset your body clock to a different cycle -- you'll be getting sleepy later and waking up later.

2. Set your body clock

Light helps restart your body clock to its active daytime phase. So when you get up, go outside and get some sunlight. Or if that's difficult, turn on all the lights in your room. Then walk around for a few minutes. The calves of your legs act as pumps and get blood circulating, carrying more oxygen to your brain to help get you going.

3. Exercise

Keep physically active during the day. This is especially important the day after a bad night's sleep. When you sleep less, you should be more active during the day. Being less active is one of the worst things an insomniac can do. Strenuous exercise (brisk walking, swimming, jogging, squash, etc.) in late afternoon seems to promote more restful sleep. Also, insomniacs tend to be too inactive a couple of hours before bed. Do some gentle exercise. A stretching routine has helped many people.

4. Don't take naps

Do not take any naps the day after you've lost sleep. When you feel sleepy, get up and do something. Walk, make the bed, or do your errands. While studying, get up regularly (every 30 minutes, or more often if necessary) to walk around your room. Do a gentle stretch. That will increase the flow of oxygen to your brain and help you to be more alert.

5. Set a bedtime schedule using these two steps:

First, try to go to bed at about the same time every night. Be regular. Most people get hungry at 7 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m. because they've eaten at those times for years. Going to bed at about the same time every night can make sleep as regular as hunger.

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Second, go to bed later when you are having trouble sleeping. If you're only getting five hours of sleep a night during your insomnia period, don't go to bed until just five hours before your wake-up time. For instance, if you've been waking up at 7 a.m., don't go to bed until 2 a.m. No naps! Make the time you spend in bed sleep time. Still some insomnia? Go to bed proportionately later. Then, as your time in bed becomes good sleep time, move your going-to-bed time back 15 to 30 minutes a night and do that for a week or so. This is the opposite of what we want to do: we want to go to bed earlier to make up the lost sleep. Learn to do what many sleep laboratories teach -- go to bed later the night after losing sleep.

Develop a Bedtime Routine

Stop working and don't get into any stimulating discussions or activities a half hour or hour before bed. Do something that's relaxing -- read "light" material, play your guitar, listen to music that is quiet, catch a mindless TV show. Some people sleep better in a clean and neat environment, so they like to straighten and clean their room just before going to bed. Find your own sleep-promoting routine.

Other ideas to help:

- **Warm bath - yes; shower - no**

Take a long, hot bath before going to bed. This helps relax and soothe your muscles. Showers, on the other hand, tend to wake you up. Insomniacs should avoid showers in the evening.

- **List "gotta do's"**

Keep a pad and pencil handy. If you think of something you want to remember, jot it down. Then let the thought go. There will be no need to lie awake worrying about remembering it

- **Practice a stretch and relaxation routine**

- **Warm milk?**

It helps some people to have a glass at bedtime. Milk has an essential amino acid, tryptophan, which stimulates the brain chemical serotonin, believed to play a key role in inducing sleep. A piece of whole wheat bread, or another carbohydrate, enhances the effect. Or try taking tryptophan, beginning with about two grams about an hour before bedtime. A piece of wheat bread will help the tryptophan to be absorbed.

- **Avoid caffeine and tyrosine-rich foods from late afternoon onwards.**

Caffeine, a chemical in coffee, colas, tea, chocolate, etc., causes hyperactivity and wakefulness.

- **Cut down on alcohol.**

Alcohol might help you get to sleep, but it results in shallow and disturbed sleep, abnormal dream periods, and frequent early morning awakening.

- **Sleeping pills**

Reasons to avoid sleeping pills include disturbed sleep patterns, short-term amnesia, and impaired motor skills. Research shows that benzodiazepine hypnotics, the most commonly prescribed sleeping pills, impair short-term memory, reaction time, thinking.

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