



HEALTHY SLEEPING

Sleep is important to your physical and mental health. It allows your mind to digest and make sense of the day's events. It prepares your brain for learning new things the next day. During sleep your brain even cleans itself! Simply put, sleep is essential for life and getting the proper amount of sleep helps us cope better with whatever life brings our way.

Getting enough sleep is essential for your emotional health. You may start to feel out of sorts and like you are not yourself if you're not sleeping well. Noises can seem louder, and colours too bright; small irritations feel like big problems, and even thinking can become a chore. It can get harder to solve problems and you may experience more aches and pains, less energy, and less interest in life. The less you sleep, the more anxious you can become about getting enough sleep, and this might make it even harder to fall asleep. You can end up in a vicious cycle – at the mercy of your over-active mind, feeling unwell, and feeling out of control.

But there are things you can do to help break that cycle! Here are a few tested and true strategies that can help.

YOU CAN CONTROL WHAT YOU EAT AND DRINK

Food – Don't eat too much too close to bedtime, but on the other hand, don't go to bed hungry. A light pre-bed snack can be good, especially one with milk in it. But avoid cocoa, as chocolate contains substances that might interfere with your sleep.

Caffeine – Some people may be more sensitive to the awakening effects of caffeine than others, but all of us react to caffeine. Get to know how your body deals with caffeine. In general, it's a good idea to avoid caffeine within 6 to 8 hours of bedtime. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, energy drinks (for example, Red Bull, Monster, Rockstar, Full Throttle, NOS), and in some soft drinks such as Coke, Pepsi, and Mountain Dew. It might also be in over-the-counter medications that are used to help control pain, such as Excedrin, Anacin, and Midol Complete. Some decongestants and other medications (for example, Sudafed, Tylenol Cold & Sinus, Dristan, Sinutab) can also make it harder to sleep, even though they don't contain caffeine.

Nicotine – Overall, it's not a good idea to smoke because of the harmful health effects caused by tobacco products. Nicotine is a tobacco product that has stimulating effects on your brain and is released in high amounts when you smoke. A common misperception is that smoking a cigarette helps to settle you down. Although nicotine can make some people feel calmer, it simultaneously tells your brain to stay awake. A good night's sleep is a much healthier way to stay calm!

Alcohol – Part of being a young person is learning how to use alcohol responsibly. Try not to consume alcohol within 3 to 4 hours of going to sleep. Alcohol might seem to relax you at first, but later in the night it can interfere with your sleep patterns.

YOU CAN CONTROL YOUR SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

Make your bedroom a good place for sleeping – dark and comfortable. Make sure it isn't too warm; people sleep better in cooler spaces. Make your bedroom a special place where you like to spend time.

Keep your bed as the place you sleep. Don't use it for doing homework, talking on the phone, texting, or watching videos and TV. You want to help your brain link being in bed with sleeping; that makes it easier to fall asleep when you are ready.

Keep electronic gadgets out of your bedroom when it's time to sleep. Remove your phone, your iPad, your computer, and any other screens from your room at bedtime. If you must keep them in your bedroom, disconnect them (for instance, put your phone in "do not disturb" mode) so that they don't interrupt you when you are ready to sleep.

YOU CAN CONTROL WHAT YOU DO DURING THE DAY AND BEFORE BED

Get at least 30 minutes of vigorous physical exercise every day. This will help tire you out. Some people find that exercising right before bed wakes them up, so if you are one of those people, schedule your exercise for earlier in the day. Others find it makes them sleepy, especially if they do yoga, pilates, or another slow-and-steady exercise. This is highly individual, so experiment with this yourself.

Have a regular bedtime. This sets your body's inner clock for sleep. Identify your circadian rhythms – the hours when you sleep best. You might sleep better if you turn out the lights by 10 p.m. than if you go to bed at midnight. Most teenagers' brains naturally want to go to sleep between 10 p.m. and midnight. Find out what your brain naturally wants to do. Experiment, but remember not to trick your brain into staying awake by watching TV, working on your computer, or talking to your friends at those times. This kind of activity can over-ride your natural sleep tendency.

Have a pre-bedtime routine that calms you down and prepares you for sleep each night. Don't spend that time getting ready for the next day, as that will wake you up. Common bedtime routines include brushing your teeth, washing your face, writing in a journal, and/or reading a chapter in a book.

Avoid looking at bright screens (such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, TVs) close to when you try to sleep, as the brightness wakes up your brain. Make your electronic devices a no-go zone for the last half-hour before bed.

YOU CAN CONTROL WHAT YOU DO WHILE YOU'RE FALLING ASLEEP

Try to put worries and problems out of your mind. Imagine something relaxing and pleasant – a purring cat, the sound of the ocean, a hike you enjoy, etc. If counting sheep works, do it!

Keep a pen and paper by your bed and jot down anything that's nagging at you. With the note there to read the next day, your mind may feel freer to relax.

It is not recommended that you use herbal remedies, such as valerian, kava-kava, or melatonin. This is because good scientific evidence doesn't yet exist to suggest that they help with sleep when they are used regularly. Additionally, they can have side effects of their own (for example, kava-kava can damage the liver), they can interact with medications that your doctor has prescribed to you, they can be expensive, and the product you buy may not contain pure herbal compounds.

We also do not recommend that you regularly take prescription medication to help you sleep. If your doctor suggests you take some medication to help you sleep, make sure you understand the risks and benefits of doing so. For help asking your doctor about your treatment, check out this resource:

<http://teenmentalhealth.org/resources/entries/communicating-with-your-health-care-provider-what-every-student-should-ask>

WHAT IF YOU HAVE TRIED ALL THE SUGGESTIONS ON THIS PAGE AND YOU STILL CAN'T SLEEP?

Try box breathing or progressive muscle relaxation to help you relax. You can do these lying in bed.

Box Breathing can help your heart rate return to normal, which helps you to relax. Here's how you do it:

- 1) Close your eyes and inhale (preferably through your nose) for 4 seconds.
- 2) Hold your breath for 4 more seconds. You're not trying to deprive yourself of air; you're just giving the air a few seconds to fill your lungs.
- 3) Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 seconds.
- 4) Pause for 4 seconds (without speaking) before breathing in again.

Repeat this process as many times as you can. Even 30 seconds of deep breathing will help you feel more relaxed.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation helps to get rid of the tense feelings in your body. Here's how you do it: Starting with your toes, clench your muscles really tightly for 5 seconds. Then let go gradually (over the course of about 15 seconds), breathing slowly and concentrating on the feeling in your toes. Then do the same thing with your entire foot. When that's complete, move on to your calves, thighs, buttocks, stomach, shoulders, arms, hands, neck, and face. By the time you've relaxed all the muscles in your body, you may find it much easier to fall asleep.

Try not to look at the clock. Place it somewhere that you can't see easily from bed, or turn it to face the wall, if necessary. However, if you're still awake after being in bed for 20 to 30 minutes, **get out of bed and do something relaxing and quiet** (such as reading a book or magazine). Avoid your TV, computer, tablet, or phone during this time, as the screen brightness will tell your brain that it's time to wake up. After 20 minutes or so, go back to bed and try sleeping again. By getting out of bed and then getting back into bed, you're teaching your body that when you're in bed, you should be sleeping.

If all else fails, use the time you're awake as a chance for your mind to process events in your life. Give in to being awake and let your mind go where it will. Just try not to do this while still lying in bed!

Remember: Everyone is different. You are an individual, and what works for you may be different from what works for other people. Experiment and find out what you need – what you can control.

These websites can also help you learn more about why sleep is important, how it helps you stay healthy, and how to improve your sleep habits:

Here to Help

<http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/wellness-module/wellness-module-6-getting-a-good-nights-sleep>

Australian Centre for Education in Sleep

<http://www.sleepeducation.net.au/adolescents.php>

Healthy Sleep

<http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/getting/overcoming/tips>

American Psychological Association

<http://www.apa.org/topics/sleep/why.aspx?item=1>

NOTE: Sometimes sleep problems can be an early sign of a significant health problem or illness. If you have been trying all these strategies and nothing seems to be working, make an appointment with your doctor to discuss your sleep problems and to see if there is something else going on that needs to be addressed.