

GETTING A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

INTRODUCTION

Sleep problems are very common, and most people have trouble sleeping from time to time, particularly in times of stress. However, over time, some people develop habits and sleep patterns which are unhelpful to them.

Fortunately, a lot of research has been done into what makes a good night's sleep. This helpsheet offers some practical activities which have been proven to help.

Normal Forms of Insomnia

All of these factors are normal if they happen occasionally or for short periods of time (for instance around exam times or after a relationship break up).

- Waking early
- Difficulty in getting to sleep
- Prolonged sleep
- Disturbed or light sleep
- Sleep interrupted by shock and fear on sudden waking (night terrors)
- Nightmares
- A short 'proper' sleep, topped up by 'cat naps' during the day
- Occasional complete absence of sleep

Not So Normal

Any of the above which becomes 'chronic' (ie lasts for an extended period of time and/or come in cycles).

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Research has shown that our bodies react in a very positive way to 'sleep cues'. We can therefore train our body to expect sleep. In addition, we can use techniques which help calm a 'busy mind' last thing at night.

If you have trouble getting off to sleep, consider trying some of these strategies:

1 Routine

- Create a 'bedtime routine'. Even if it consists of only three regular elements (for instance bath, milky drink, bed), routine helps trigger our body's sleep preparations.

It can help to write down your routine and pin it up somewhere visible, as a reminder of the changes you are making.

- Try to aim for a bed-time which is more or less the same every night (often easier said than done!).

- Don't exercise just before bed-time. Although being physically tired helps with getting off to sleep, it can increase stress hormone levels in the short term.
- Reduce mental activity two hours before sleep if possible. At the very least try to build in some 'wind down' time at the end of every evening.
- Try a bath an hour before bed. This acts to raise your core body temperature slightly. As your core temperature drops again, physiological changes make you sleepy.
- Reduce light levels two hours before sleep if possible.
- If you smoke, try not to have a cigarette just before bedtime (it's a respiratory stimulant).

2 Eating and Drinking

- Try to make your last meal carbohydrate (pasta/rice) rather than protein heavy (cheese/meat). Carbohydrates make us feel sleepy (they help us produce tryptophan which influences the level of serotonin in the brain). Protein based foods are good if you need to stay alert (lunchtime).
- Foods/drinks containing melatonin may be helpful (oats, sweet corn, rice, ginger, tomatoes, bananas and barley) - oats contain most, barley the least.
- Don't go to bed hungry but don't eat your main meal just before bed-time.
- Try not to drink caffeine before bed-time (if you are a coffee addict your last cup should be at least 3 hours before bed).

3 Switching Your Head Off

- If you study in your room, try tidying up your books at the end of the evening, so that you are not trying to sleep surrounded by clutter and work.
- If your mind seems to have a life of its own when you are trying to get to sleep, write down all the things that you suddenly remember/worry about/find pre-occupying in a notebook and put it by the side of your bed. Then tell yourself that it's all there for you to pick up in the morning, but now is the time to sleep.
- Try relaxation downloads. There are lots on the internet – some are vocal (choose someone whose voice you like!) others are sound or music based.
- Try progressive relaxation. Systematically tense and relax each part of your body in turn, starting with your feet and ending with your face. Tense each part of you in turn for 5 seconds and then relax.
- Try some breathing techniques (the Counselling Service helpsheet Breath In Calm, Breath Out Stress has detailed instructions)

HOW TO STAY ASLEEP

- Try to make your room as dark as possible. Our bodies use light as a 'trigger' to wake up. If you are scared of the dark, it may be better to buy a night light rather than sleep with the curtains ajar.
- Make sure the temperature of the room is comfortable. Think about the whole night (does the central heating come on very early in the morning, for instance?).
- Try not to have too much fluid before going to bed, (avoid being woken by a full bladder).
- Don't drink alcohol. It may help get you off to sleep, but it disturbs sleep patterns – you are much more likely to wake in the night. Alcohol also reduces the amount of deep and REM sleep, which we need to feel refreshed.
- Try ear plugs if you are trying to sleep in a noisy environment or have night owl housemates.
- Make your bed as comfortable as possible. Invest in good quality pillows!

IF YOU CAN'T SLEEP

- Don't lie awake in bed for hours on end. Give it 20 minutes and then get up until you feel drowsy again.
- If you wake up in the night regularly, make sure you have a comfortable place to sit if you have to get up – a blanket and a low light can help. Don't sit on your bed.
- If you are worried about something write it down.
- Have a range of gentle distractions available for use in the event of insomnia – light reading, knitting, easy Sudokus or cross-words. Avoid stimulating activities (eg late night horror films!)
- Don't magnify or alarm yourself over your sleepless state. Try to keep it in perspective.
- Try not to lie in or have cat naps the next day to try to catch up on lost sleep. It may feel hard, but you are much more likely to sleep through the next night if you grit your teeth and stay awake until your usual bed-time.

Getting Help from Others

- Check with your doctor if your snoring regularly wakes you up or you suffer from severe/prolonged sleep disturbance.
- Talk with a counsellor if anything is worrying you enough to stop you sleeping on an on-going basis.

BOOKS

- Relief from Insomnia – Getting the Sleep of Your Dreams Morin CM, Main Street Books
- The Good Sleep Guide Michael Van Straten, Kyle Cathie Publishing
- No More Sleepless Nights Peter Hauri, John Wylie & Sons Inc

WEB LINKS

www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/sleep