

Sleep Smarter

Sleep hygiene is a term used to describe good sleep habits - things you can do to give yourself the best chance of a good refreshing sleep. Most of these things are common sense but in the hustle and bustle of modern life are often neglected.

Here are some **Dos** and **Don'ts** to help you get a good night's sleep. If you're having trouble sleeping, following to some of these simple tips may help.

DO

Get up at the same time each day

Getting up at the same time helps to keep your body clock running smoothly. If you can stick to a fairly regular waking and sleeping time, your body will become accustomed to it. Avoid the temptation to try to make up for a poor night's sleep by sleeping in. However, this doesn't mean that you should be obsessive about it, an occasional night out or sleep in is not going to hurt.

Get regular exercise each day

There is good evidence that regular exercise improves restful sleep. Exercise before dinner or in the morning works best.

Be comfortable and relaxed

It's hard to sleep when you are cold. Warm hands and feet are particularly important. If you have uncomfortable pillows, mattress or bedclothes, consider replacing them. You will spend the next eight hours in bed and you don't want to be uncomfortable. A warm bath about an hour before bedtime which may promote sleep.

Make the bedroom a restful place

This means keeping the temperature cool, keeping noises and outside light to a minimum and leaving distracting things such as beeping watches or clocks outside.

Use your bed only for sleep (and sex)

Some people use the bed as a lounge room, by knitting, studying, watching television, telephoning etc. You need to try and avoid this and make sure that the bed is associated with sleeping. The brain makes connections between places (the bedroom) and events (sleeping) and you need to reinforce these. Make sure the bed is for sleeping and sleeping happens in the bed.

Take medications as directed

Prescription medications may make you either alert, or sleepy. Make sure you follow the directions for taking them, and take them at the same time each day.

Get as much natural light as you can

Natural light is important for the body to produce melatonin which is a sleep promoting substance. Sunlight early in the day is particularly helpful in synchronising your body clock.

Understand your sleep need

Most people need between seven and nine hours sleep each day but this includes naps and time spent dozing in front of the television.

DON'T

Exercise just before going to bed

Exercise immediately before bed stimulates the body and may make it difficult to fall asleep. Exercise earlier in the day, preferably before dinner time.

Make the bedroom a stressful place

Avoid competitive games, thrillers and intense conversation just before bed - an overstimulated mind can be hard to switch off.

Consume caffeine in the evening

Coffee and tea contain caffeine. Check the label on soft drinks for caffeine, especially cola and energy drinks. Warm milk helps many people sleep and is a better option before bed. If frequent trips to the toilet are a problem during the night, try not to drink too much.

Go to bed too hungry or too full

If you are in the habit of taking a light supper, you should keep doing this but keep snacks light and not too sweet or salty.

Share your bed with children or pets

Research has shown that parents sleeping with young children sleep less and have more disturbed sleep.

Stay in bed if you are awake

If you do not fall asleep within a reasonable time, perhaps 20-30 minutes, then get up and do something boring, but do it in another room. Try and keep the lighting fairly dim. When you are tired, go back to bed. This helps your mind associate the bed with sleeping.

Rely on sleeping tablets to help you to sleep

Sleeping tablets have a role where there is some event or other circumstance that may temporarily cause you to have trouble falling asleep but they are a temporary fix only. Some tablets may cause you to be a bit sleepy in the daytime and when you stop taking them you may find it harder to fall asleep.

Look at the clock all the time

Clocks with bright numbers are a distraction and obsessing about time, will just make it more difficult to sleep.

Smoke

Quitting smoking has many health benefits, and stopping eliminates the stimulant effects of nicotine that contribute to sleep loss.

Use alcohol to help you sleep

Alcohol may help you to get to sleep but your sleep is of poor quality and not restful. It causes you to need more trips to the toilet, it causes you to wake up early, it causes fragmented sleep and it worsens snoring and sleep apnoea.

Many sleeping problems are due to bad habits built up over a long period. You won't fix sleeping problems in one night; persevere with good sleep habits and sleep should get better. Different things may work for you, find out what works and stick with it. Above all, don't obsess about your sleep problems, one poor night's sleep is not a problem. Just return to your good sleep habits the next night. If despite good sleep habits you still have difficulty, then see your doctor as something else may be disturbing your sleep.