

Sleep Hygiene

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The good habits that lead to good sleep are collectively known as “sleep hygiene.” Just like good oral hygiene helps to keep your teeth healthy, good sleep hygiene helps to keep you sleeping well.

- 1) Exercise. Aerobic exercise is helpful for sleep in two ways. One, it helps the body break down and eliminate stress hormones that can keep you up worrying. Second, it helps you fall into the deeper stages of sleep in which you will be less disturbed by dreams.
- 2) Diet: Eating a healthy, balanced diet helps you manage your stress. Eating a snack that has some carbohydrates before bed may help you feel sleepy. Eating a big, hard-to-digest meal may disrupt sleep.
- 3) Drugs: Caffeine, nicotine, cocaine and other stimulants are meant to keep you awake. If you're having insomnia, it's best to stay away from stimulants. As tempting as it is to drink coffee to cope with fatigue after a night of insomnia, you're setting yourself up for more insomnia the next night.
- 4) Develop a bedtime routine: For example, one hour before bed, turn the lights down low. Have a snack. Take a warm bath. Put on pajamas. Drink a chamomile tea. Brush your teeth. Read a book for pleasure. Doing things in the same order each night tells your brain “Bedtime is approaching.”
- 5) Keep a consistent schedule: Waking up at different times each day is confusing to the body's circadian rhythms. Our body builds fatigue throughout the day but also has a pattern of alertness. Ideally, at bedtime, alertness is low and fatigue is high. When we change our sleep schedule frequently, that pattern is disrupted.
- 6) Stay away from your devices near bedtime: the type of light emitted by computers and cell phones sends the message to the brain that it is daytime. In response, the brain does not release the hormones associated with sleep.
- 7) Reserve your bed for sleep: Do not do homework or pay bills in your bed. Your bed should be for sleep, not stress.
- 8) If you're not falling asleep, get out of bed: As hard as it is, if you don't fall asleep right away, get out of bed. Move to a comfortable location. Write out any worries that are on your mind. Write until you no longer can come up with any worries. Return to bed. Repeat as necessary.
- 9) Take a “So What” attitude: It's easy to fall into worrying about sleep loss. Try to tell yourself “So what. I can lose some sleep. I will just rest my body. Eventually, I'll get my sleep back on track.”

Of course, it is possible to be doing all of the right things for sleep and still have insomnia. If you have been following this list of advice and sleep is still eluding you, please see your physician for a full physical. You can also discuss the possibility of medication for sleep. Some types of medication are more helpful than others. If depression, anxiety or another mental health disorder is causing your insomnia, it's best to take medication to treat the underlying cause rather than taking medication that only brings on sleep.

Note: I am not a medical doctor and cannot prescribe or give medical advice. I can give you my sympathy! Insomnia is one of the hardest things to endure. Good luck finding your way back to sleeping well.

