# Habits for Healthy Sleep

Most of the time, for most people, sleep comes easily. We don't usually give much thought to what contributes to good sleep, because it seems to just happen. But when we have trouble sleeping, we begin to search for ways to restore healthy sleep. We try all sorts of things recommended by various people, but often this amounts to a random series of trial-and-error attempts that don't really help. Luckily, much research has already addressed the question of what is necessary for us to have normal sleep, and a number of answers are available.

Overall, it is very important to be consistent. Re-training your brain for good sleep requires developing habits. If you follow a routine that stays the same from day to day, week to week, you may find your sleep gradually improving over time. It probably won't matter so much if you occasionally break your routine once you are back to having good sleep, but when sleep is precarious and uncertain, regular habits are needed to correct the problem.

Regardless of how simple and ordinary some of the following suggestions may seem, please keep in mind that all of them can contribute to healthy sleep. You will need to be patient: once you have established good habits, it will take a few weeks for your brain to get into a new rhythm of better sleep. If you still don't sleep well despite good sleep habits, please review with your doctor the possibility that you have a medical disorder that interferes with sleep.

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- Go to bed at the same time every night and get up the same time every morning ... even on weekends. Remember: consistency is important.

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and nicotine for 8 hours before bedtime.

- Turn down or turn off computer and tablet screens close to bedtime: the light seems to put your brain in "awake" mode.

- Have an afternoon nap if you need to. It can be helpful to lie down and close your eyes in a quiet, darkened place, even if you don't actually fall asleep. Use an alarm, if necessary, to make sure you get up after 20-30 minutes.

- Exercise every day: as a minimum, 30 minutes of vigorous walking.

- Avoid strenuous exercise in the 3-4 hours before you go to sleep.

- Finish any strenuous mental activity (studying, working on tax returns, etc.) at least 1 hour before bedtime.

- Make sure your last full meal is at least 3 hours before bedtime.

- Consider taking a hot bath 60-90 minutes before you go to bed. The decline in your body temperature after the bath can help induce sleep.

- Have a small snack 1/2 hour to 1 hour before you go to bed. It should contain sources of food energy that will last: whole grains, proteins or healthy oils. Although fruits and vegetables are healthful, the food energy in them would be gone quickly.

- Establish a bedtime "ritual" for yourself: do the same things in the same order every night in the half hour or so before you go to bed. This could include such things as brushing your teeth, getting your clothes ready for the morning, reading something light, listening to calm music, doing relaxation exercises, etc.

- Your bed is only for sleeping. You don't want your brain to come to link "lying in bed" with "being alert", so don't read or watch TV or do anything else in bed (the exception is sex).

- There should be no visible clock in your bedroom. Knowing the time will only make you be anxious or upset about how little time you have left to sleep! Turn your clock away from you or place something in front of it. It's OK to use an alarm to waken you in the morning, but although the alarm needs to know what time it is during the night, you don't.

- Your bedroom should be darkened for sleep. Your biological day-night rhythm may benefit from sunlight for a little while after you get up in the morning.

- If noises bother you, use ear plugs.

- You may sleep better if your room is somewhat cool at night.

- If worrying or ruminating regularly keeps you from going to sleep, you could try setting an "appointment" with yourself at some time earlier in the evening to deal with the thoughts that might bother you. Set aside 15 minutes to go over the day's worries, perhaps write a few words on paper about them, and then put those thoughts away. Your mind will be clearer when you go to bed later.

- You might keep a little notepad beside your bed, so that if you just can't stop thinking about something bothersome, you can jot down one or two words to remind yourself what the issue was and deal with it in the morning. Be careful, though, not to let this become a time for planning what to do the next day!

- If at any time you find yourself awake in bed for 15-20 minutes, get out of bed. Once again, you don't want your brain to learn to associate being in bed with being awake. Do something soothing in the dark (listen to soft music, do relaxation exercises, etc.) until you feel sleepy, and then get back in bed. Don't watch TV or do any sort of work.

- Start your day at your planned waking time. Don't be tempted to "sleep in": it is more important to train your body to follow your regular schedule of sleep hours.