

Principles of Sleep Hygiene

Sleep Hygiene refers to the principles of behaviour and the techniques you need to develop to ensure you get a good night's sleep and wake up feeling great. These principles apply to all of us, and if you make them into habits you will be amazed at how much better you will sleep.

Get the right amount of sleep for YOU:

Many people complain of insomnia, when in fact they are simply misinterpreting their body's needs. It may be that they are not tired at night, or are waking up early because they don't need as much sleep as others, e.g. waking up at 4:00 am because they went to bed at 8:00 pm the night before – they have actually had their full quota of sleep and are ready to wake up naturally.

If you want to work out how many hours of sleep *you* need, then keep a sleep diary for at least 7 days when you are relaxed (for example when you are on holiday), not drinking alcohol and are able to go to sleep when you want to and wake up when you want to without an alarm clock. By the end of the week you should be in your natural pattern of sleep, and will be able to see how many hours you should sleep for.

Of course, even this will change as your levels of stress and physical activity change, and will not be the same when you are a child as when you are an adult.

The test of insufficient sleep is whether you are sleepy during the day, or if you remain alert through most of the day. In a nutshell, if you sleep for eight hours a night and yet find yourself lolling and drooling on the keyboard at work, you aren't getting enough, but if you're sleeping for five hours and running the company with energy, you probably are getting enough!

Set a regular bedtime and wake-up time

Create a habit of going to bed and waking up at the same time each day, even on days off and weekends. This helps anchor your body clock to these times. Resisting the urge for a lie-in can pay dividends in alertness.

Try to avoid alarm clocks. If you need an alarm clock to wake you up every day you are not going to bed early enough.

If you feel you haven't slept well, resist the urge to sleep in longer than normal - getting up on schedule keeps your body in its normal wake-up routine. Remember, even after only four hours, the brain has gained many of the important benefits of sleep.

Avoid alcohol

Alcohol is a depressant - it slows brain activity. This means that it helps to induce sleep initially, but disrupts it later on. "Nightcaps" can result in awakenings, nightmares and early morning headaches.

Alcohol is also a diuretic, which means it encourages you to urinate – you wake up because your body tells you have to go to the toilet!

Drinking is also more likely to lead to snoring, which can restrict airflow into the lungs. This reduces oxygen in your blood which disturbs your sleep and contributes to your hangover.

You should avoid alcohol within 4 – 6 hours of bedtime.

Avoid stimulants

Stimulants include caffeine, nicotine and some prescription and non-prescription drugs. Do not have them within 3 – 4 hours of bedtime.

Caffeine is a stimulant which can stay in your system for many hours. So avoid sources of caffeine such as energy drinks, Red Bull, coffee, hot chocolate, Milo, cola drinks, non-herbal teas and chocolate bars close to your bedtime.

Caffeine withdrawal can also disturb sleep, so while you are cutting back you may actually experience more sleep disturbance for a period of time.

Watch what you eat

Eating a large, heavy meal too close to bedtime will interfere with your sleep. Spicy or fatty foods may cause heartburn, which leads to difficulty in falling asleep and discomfort throughout the night.

Foods containing tyramine (bacon, cheese, ham, aubergines, pepperoni, raspberries, avocado, nuts, soy sauce and red wine) might keep you awake at night. Tyramine causes the release of norepinephrine, a brain stimulant.

If you get the munchies close to bedtime, eat something that triggers the hormone serotonin, which makes you sleepy. Carbohydrates such as bread, cereal or fruit will do the trick.

Milk contains a sleep promoting substance called Tryptophan. The so-called “old wives’ tale” of drinking a cup of hot milk laced with honey before bed, is actually true. It *does* help you sleep. (The milk must not be boiled though, as it loses its sleep-inducing properties).

Exercise regularly – but not before bed

Regular, moderate exercise is a great way to improve your sleep. Just be careful not to do it close to bedtime as exercise produces stimulants that stop the brain from relaxing quickly. You should avoid exercise within 4 – 6 hours of bedtime.

Since exercise produces stimulants, exercising in the morning is an excellent way to wake up the body. Going for a run, swim, paddle or doing some other aerobic exercise releases stimulants into the body, which perks you up.

If you are injured or disabled, you can still benefit from exercise.

Create a calm bedroom environment

Your bedroom should be for sleep (and sex) only. Avoid turning it into an entertainment centre with televisions, computers and stereos.

It is important that you have a comfortable bed – with a good quality mattress. Cotton bedding is best as it helps keep your body at a constant temperature, and reduces the amount you perspire.

Make sure you are warm or cool enough to sleep - make use of temperature regulators like electric blankets, hot water bottles, fans and air-conditioning to ensure you are a comfortable temperature for YOU.

The room should be dark – invest in curtains or blinds which block out the light, especially if you live in an area where the sun rises early (or doesn't go down).

The room should be quiet. Use ear plugs for noise problems or create 'white noise' (for example, an overhead fan) if that helps.

Get out of bed if you can't sleep

Don't lie in bed for hours tossing and turning. If you are brooding over your worries, or the fact that you are not going to sleep – you won't!

If you don't fall asleep after 20 minutes get up and leave the room. Read a 'boring' book, watch 'boring' TV, do a jigsaw or do some other quiet, non-stimulating activity, until you feel drowsy again and go back to bed. Repeat as often as necessary until sleep adjusts and quality returns.

It is important to *get out of bed* to do these activities because you want to train your brain that bed is a place to sleep, not be active.

Set Electronic Devices to 'Reduced Light' at Night

Electronic devices, such as computers, laptops, tablets, readers and mobiles devices emit a certain kind of light – light in the blue-and-white range – which has an effect on our body.

Our bodies operate according to Circadian Rhythms which help us adapt to the daily cycle of day and night, or light and dark, as the Earth rotates every 24 hours. Our Circadian system controls various functions, including when we sleep and rest, and when we are awake and active. Melatonin is a key hormone in our circadian system. A night-time Melatonin is released, which tells your body that it is night and helps to make you sleepy so you can get a good night's sleep.

But, bright light emitted from devices such as laptops, tablets and reading devices suppresses our normal night-time release of Melatonin which in turn can delay sleep. Research indicates that "if you do that for many years, it can lead to a disruption of the circadian system," which can have serious health consequences. Backlit screens are implicated in depression, anxiety disorders and sleep disorders. Depression and sleep disorders are implicated in decreased immune function, obesity and heart disease.

The actual dose of light makes a difference - its wavelength, its brightness and the length of time we are exposed to the light all determine whether it affects melatonin or not. You can do a lot to help by switching to white text on a black screen at night to minimize the light dose. You can also turn down the brightness of your screens at night —there are apps that can do that for you - or switch back to good old-fashioned books!

Relax your mind

An overactive, stressed mind is one of the main contributors to sleep problems. Start preparing for sleep 30 minutes before going to bed. Stop working, turn down your bed, subdue the lighting, and have a warm bath or shower (not hot).

Some people find that lavender, valerian or other herbs help them to sleep. Use essential oils or fresh herbs in your bath. Put fresh herbs under your pillow. (Remember essential oils are powerful agents. Be sure to have proper advice on how to use them safely).

Make sure you have checked your diary, write down what you have to do and/or remember for the next day and *let them go!*

Have a pen and paper by your bedside so that if something does pop into your head you can write it down and then forget about it until morning.

Try not to argue with your spouse/partner and don't discuss finances at night!

Relax by doing all or some of the following:

- Listen to beautiful, relaxing music, or play a musical instrument to clear your mind.
- Do some gentle yoga exercises to clear your mind and release tension in your body.
- Simple breathing exercises can help. Breathe, using your abdomen not your chest.
- Meditate and / or pray.

Don't take long afternoon naps

Most of us have a natural dip in alertness between 2 - 4pm. That is normal and doesn't necessarily mean you are not getting enough sleep.

A 15 - 20 minute nap when you're tired can be a very effective way of staying alert throughout the day. Don't nap for longer than 20 minutes, however, as you will then enter a deep sleep and feel even worse when you wake up.

Never sleep during the day if you suffer from insomnia.

Seek treatment if your problem continues

If you have trouble falling asleep night after night, or if you always feel tired the next day, you might have a sleep disorder. It is advisable to seek more advice from a psychologist who treats sleep disorders, your doctor or homeopath, or a sleep specialist. Most sleep disorders can be treated effectively.

This document forms part of my materials developed for HELM
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Phone: +27 (0)31 764 2616
Mobile: +27 (0)82 491 1136
Email: claire@clairenewton.co.za

www.clairenewton.co.za

Address: 3 Impunzi Place, Kloof, 3610, South Africa