

Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene is a set of personal sleep habits that can interfere with sleep. We are all very different. Some people struggle with chronic insomnia, while others can have the worst sleep habits and are still able to sleep on demand. While there are many medications to help with sleep, they tend to have negative side effects and can be costly. There are no side effects to changing one's sleep hygiene. It only requires some willingness and discipline. And it works for many people.

During the Day

- *Do not take naps. If you must nap, limit to only one nap, not too late in the day, and not over 45 minutes.
- *Regular exercise can help with sleep but do not exercise within four hours before bedtime.
- *Limit caffeine intake and avoid caffeine at least 4-6 hours before bedtime.
- *Avoid alcohol, sugary, heavy or spicy foods at least 4-6 hours before bedtime.
- *Sunlight can help us set our biological clock. Exposure to sunlight (like being in a sun-filled room) in the morning can help. Limit light exposure from the computer or TV close to bedtime. Lower the brightness on your monitor if you must be on the computer close to bedtime. (Notice how that may relax your eye muscles a bit.)

Sleep Environment

- *The bed should be comfortable. The bedroom should be quiet, dark and cool (not cold but not too warm). Think "cave-like." Caves provided many of our ancestors a safe environment to sleep in.
- *Limit the activities in bed to sleep and sex. Do not read, use the computer, do your bills, or watch TV in bed. You want to associate your sleep environment with sleep, and not your work worries or entertainment.

Before Sleep

- *Many people find that taking a hot shower/warm bath can help them sleep better. Understand that we tend to get sleepy when our body temperature starts to cool down from the hot shower. Take the shower about 90 minutes before bedtime to optimize the effect.
- *Establish a pre-sleep ritual. Think of things that can help you relax. It may be a few minutes of reading, a cup of herbal tea, some soothing music, a light and warm snack, some deep breathing, meditation, etc.

Can't sleep or getting up in the middle of the night

- *We can only sleep when we're sleepy. "Willing" ourselves to sleep generally doesn't work.
- *Do not linger in bed for more than 15 minutes. You want to associate your bed with sleep, not with insomnia, your failed effort to fall asleep, and all the worries that accompany your sleeplessness! Get up

and leave the room. Do any quiet activities that may help you relax, such as reading something that is not stressful, meditating, having a light snack. If particular thoughts or worries are keeping you up, jot them down on a post-it and let them go. Any planning or worrying can wait until daytime. Return to bed when you feel sleepy.

*Checking the time generally only creates more anxiety. If you've been lingering in bed for a while, just get out of bed no matter what time it is. (You don't have to check the clock to see if you've been lingering for 15 minutes or not, just estimate it.)

How much sleep is “enough”?

*The 8-hour rule does not apply for everyone! Some people need more, some less. Enough sleep is whatever it takes for us to feel rested the next day.

Sleep schedule and cautions on weekends

*If you generally need 7 hours of sleep to feel rested, and you need to get up at 7am for work, you should be in bed by 12pm (but not too much earlier than that), and have your pre-sleep rituals before then.

*Sleeping in on the weekends can feel so good but it can really mess up our sleep schedule! In the above example, for someone who requires 7 hours of sleep, generally they won't get sleepy until they've been awake for 17 hours ($24-7=17$). Again, we can only sleep when we're sleepy. If this person sleeps in until 10am on Saturday, stays up until 2am on Saturday night, sleeps in until 10am again on Sunday, it won't be surprising if the person can't fall asleep until 3am (17 hours after the 10am wake up time) on Sunday night, a school night.

*Ideally, people with sleep troubles should keep to their regular sleep schedule 7 days a week. If you find yourself in the aforementioned Sunday night “insomnia” situation as a result of sleeping in on the weekend, consider keeping your ideal wake up time on Monday. It will be hard to get up and you may feel tired throughout the day but this will prevent the domino effect of sleeplessness for the rest of the week. Not getting enough sleep for one day is okay. For many people, worrying or obsessing about their sleeplessness only makes the sleeplessness worse. Trust that your sleep schedule can be corrected.

Disclaimer and Sources

*These are just general guidelines to establish good sleep hygiene. It is helpful for many but not everyone. Please consult with a sleep specialist if needed, especially for those who are on medications that may interfere with sleep, and/or those who suffer from chronic insomnia. Consider seeing a specialist who is trained in CBT-I (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia), a proven effective non-pharmacological treatment for insomnia. The treatment is usually short-term (3-10 sessions) but the tools one learns will be long-term. Sleep hygiene is only one component of CBT-I treatment.

* <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/insomnia-treatment/SL00013>

* http://www.umm.edu/sleep/sleep_hyg.htm

* <http://drrosslevin.com/faqs.html>

* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_behavioral_therapy_for_insomnia