

Sleep Hygiene Guidelines

Sleep Only as Much as Needed to Feel Refreshed the Following Day

Spending excessive time in bed can lead to shallow sleep.

Your Bedroom Should Be Comfortable and Free from Light and Noise

A comfortable bed and bedroom environment will reduce the likelihood that you will wake up during the night. Excessively warm or cold rooms can disrupt sleep as well. A quiet environment is more sleep-promoting than a noisy one. Noises can be masked with background white noise, such as the noise of a fan, or with earplugs. Bedrooms may be darkened with blackout shades, or sleep masks can be worn. Position clocks out of sight since clock-watching can increase anxiety about lack of sleep.

Caffeine: Avoid Caffeine 4 - 6 Hours Before Bedtime

Caffeine disturbs sleep, even in people who do not subjectively experience such an effect. Individuals with insomnia are often more sensitive to mild stimulants than are normal sleepers. Caffeine is found in items such as coffee, tea, soda, chocolate, and many over-the-counter medications (e.g., Excedrin). Thus, drinking caffeinated beverages should be avoided near bedtime and during the night.

Nicotine: Avoid Nicotine Before Bedtime

Although some smokers claim that smoking helps them relax, nicotine is a stimulant. Thus, smoking, dipping, or chewing tobacco should be avoided near bedtime and during the night.

Alcohol: Avoid Alcohol After Dinner

A small amount of alcohol often promotes the onset of sleep, but as alcohol is metabolized, sleep becomes disturbed and fragmented. Thus, alcohol is a poor sleep aid and should not be used as such.

Sleeping Pills: Sleep Medications Are Effective Only Temporarily

Scientists have shown that sleep medications lose their effectiveness in about 2 to 4 weeks when taken regularly. Despite advertisements to the contrary, over-the-counter sleeping aids have little impact on sleep beyond the placebo effect. Over time, sleeping pills actually can make sleep problems worse. When sleeping pills have been used for a long period, withdrawal from the medication can lead to an insomnia rebound. Thus, many individuals incorrectly conclude that they “need” sleeping pills in order to sleep normally.

Exercise/Hot Bath: Avoid Vigorous Exercise Within 2 Hours of Bedtime

Regular exercise in the late afternoon or early evening seems to aid sleep, although the positive effect often takes several weeks to become noticeable. Exercising sporadically is not likely to improve sleep, and exercise within 2 hours of bedtime may elevate nervous system activity and interfere with sleep onset. Spending 20 minutes in a tub of hot water an hour or two prior to bedtime may also promote sleep.

Napping: Avoid Daytime Napping

Many individuals with insomnia “pay” for daytime naps with more sleeplessness at night. Additionally, naps can lead to sleep inertia such as transient daytime grogginess, and some people report headaches after afternoon naps. Thus, it is best to avoid daytime napping. If you do nap, be sure to schedule them so you wake up before 3:00 p.m. and try to limit to 10-20 minutes.

Eating: A Light Snack at Bedtime May Be Sleep Promoting

A light bedtime snack, such a glass of warm milk, cheese, or a bowl of cereal can promote sleep. You should avoid the following foods at bedtime: any caffeinated foods (e.g., chocolate), peanuts, beans, most raw fruits and vegetables (since they may cause gas), and high-fat foods such as potato or corn chips. Avoid snacks in the middle of the nights, since awakening may become conditioned to hunger.

Avoid Excessive Liquids in the Evening

Reducing liquid intake will decrease the need for nighttime trips to the bathroom.