A guide to improving your sleep

Nearly a quarter of people in Britain have problems with sleep on a regular basis (The Sleep Council) and almost half of us lose sleep because of stress or worries. After a poor night's sleep you will often feel tired, short-tempered and find it hard to focus. However, the odd night without sleep won't harm your health.

Yet, after several sleepless nights, you are likely to experience more serious effects. You will probably find your brain feels foggy, which makes decision-making and concentration difficult. You'll potentially feel low and may drop off to sleep during the day. This also increases your risk of having an accident or injuring yourself.

It is recommended that adults should get between seven and nine hours of sleep a night so they can function at their best. You can try this simple test as tried out recently by the BBC to see if you are getting enough sleep.

So how can you maximise your chances of getting those precious forty winks?

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1. Get into a routine

Going to bed and getting up at regular times – even at a weekend – can help your body's internal clock to get used to a set routine. Pick a schedule that works for you and stick to it as it will help to regulate your body clock. This may be tough at first – particularly if you're used to lying in after having a bad night's kip – but persevere and you are likely to reap the rewards.

2. Improve your bedroom

The place you sleep is just as important as what you do. Try to make your room as comfortable and relaxing as possible to improve your chances of getting to sleep. The ideal room is dark and quiet, with a temperature between 18C and 24C.

- Consider removing any gadgets that emit light, such as TVs or consoles

- If street lights disturb your sleep, consider putting up blackout curtains

- Some people find white noise machines, sleep masks or fans helpful to block out other noise

- It has also been recently discovered that 'pink noise' can help sleep.

It's also worth considering how comfortable your bed and pillows are. Mattresses have a lifespan of about 9-10 years, so if yours is older it may be worth shelling out for a new one.

Bedroom clutter can also be an issue – particularly if you can't sleep because of stress – clear the space as best you can. This also makes the room feel more inviting and easier to relax in.

If you can, keep your bedroom for sleeping, avoiding working or watching TV in it, as this may also help.

3. Have a 'wind down'

Try to chill out for a bit before trying to get some sleep. For example:

- Have a warm bath
- Read a book
- Listen to relaxing music
- Practice mindfulness – try the Headspace sleep meditations

Some people also find it helpful to write out a to-do list or a list of worries and how to solve them before going to bed.

Avoid using screens that emit light – such as smartphones, laptops or eReaders – before going to bed. Studies have shown that using light-emitting devices before bed has a negative effect on sleep.

If worries tend to keep you awake, our blog on beating stress may also be helpful.

4. Limit nap time

If you find you have to nap during the day to keep your energy levels up, set an alarm and ensure you only have a lie-down for 10-20 minutes. If possible, try to avoid napping altogether – especially if you're trying to establish a sleep routine.
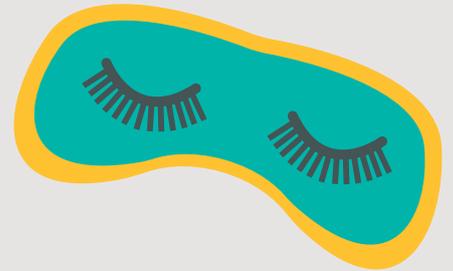
5. Keep a sleep diary

If you often have trouble sleeping, try keeping a sleep diary to help you spot any patterns – such as diet, activities or stress – that may be affecting it. The NHS has a helpful downloadable sleep diary on its website.

This will also be helpful if you decide to see your GP or a sleep specialist.

6. Cut back on caffeine and alcohol

If you have trouble sleeping, try to avoid consuming anything containing caffeine – including tea, coffee, energy drinks and Coke – for 4–6 hours before going to bed. About half the caffeine you take in at 7pm will still be in your system at 11pm (UCLA). It won't make a difference straight away, but you may notice a change within a week.

Drinking alcohol before going to bed may help you to get to sleep at first, but it has a negative effect on the quality of sleep you get. Avoid drinking it just before going to bed.

7. Exercise helps sleep

A poll running on The Sleep Council's website says that 71% of people find exercise helps them sleep. So, think about how to make time for exercise – and it doesn't have to be an expensive gym membership. Go for a walk or run in the fresh air. For more inspiration, check out our blog on **cheap ways to get fit**.

8. Don't smoke before bed

Just like caffeine, nicotine is a stimulant, so if you smoke, you are likely to get less sleep. It's not just the quantity, but the quality of your sleep which is likely to be affected. The closer to bed time you smoke, the greater the impact on your sleep, **a study found**. If you would like to find out how to give up smoking, you can read the **NHS' self-help tips**.

9. Get your essential vitamins

Our bodies need the right vitamins and minerals to keep functioning properly and that includes sleep. Many of us are deficient in the essential mineral, magnesium, and this has been found to cause insomnia, so eating foods such as leafy green veg, pumpkin seeds and almonds can up your intake. You can use a magnesium spray, but always read the instructions first.

A lack of potassium, found in bananas, avocados, dark leafy greens and fish, can lead to difficulty staying asleep throughout the night. Additionally, calcium, a vital mineral found in dairy, helps the brain to manufacture melatonin: the hormone that lets us drop off. So drinking a glass of milk or a hot milky drink before bedtime isn't just an old wives' tale!

If you really can't sleep...

If you can't get to sleep, staying in bed for hours tossing and turning might not be the best idea. Get up, go to a quiet room and do something relaxing until you feel tired. Try sipping camomile tea and doing a sleep meditation. (Revisit the 'have a wind down' section).

Chat to your GP

Make an appointment to see your GP if your sleep problems are having an effect on your everyday life. This is especially important if making some of the changes above hasn't helped or it's been going on for over a month.

Your GP may suggest keeping a sleep diary (see above), check your medical history for any illness/medication that may affect your sleep and ask about your lifestyle.

More information

You can read our blog on managing stress and worries. You can also find advice on a range of wellbeing topics on our financial, mental, physical and social health pages. The NHS also has lots of advice on sleep – including conditions such as insomnia, fatigue and sleep apnoea – on its Better Sleep pages.

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