

Sleep Hygiene

For most people, falling asleep and staying asleep are parts of a natural process. Good sleepers are likely to have developed certain lifestyle and dietary habits or behaviors – known as sleep hygiene – can have positive effects on sleep before, during, and after time spent in bed. Sleep hygiene is mostly a matter of common sense, but the techniques suggested here may help you sleep better.

Diet

Caffeine – stimulates the brain and interferes with sleep.

Nicotine – stimulates the brain; withdrawal from this drug can disrupt sleep for a short time.

Alcohol – slows down brain activity; when taken at bedtime, alcohol may help induce sleep at first, but will disrupt sleep later in the night.

Meals – Eating a full meal shortly before bedtime can interfere with the ability to fall asleep and stay asleep. A light snack at bedtime, however, can promote sleep.

Other Factors

Environment – A comfortable bed, in a dark, quiet room is the best setting for a good night's sleep. Small changes in surroundings can disrupt sleep.

Time – Sometimes having a clock by the bed, and constantly knowing what time it is, or how much time you have lost, and have left until you get up makes things worse. Sleep without that pressure is much easier. Some people find it is better to set the alarm and put it in a drawer.

Exercise – Regular exercise helps people sleep better. But the benefits depend on the time of day you exercise. Usually morning exercise will not disrupt sleep. Exercise relieves stress, worry, and boredom which can disrupt sleep.

What can you do to sleep better?

Distract your mind:

Lying in bed frustrated because you cannot sleep, and trying harder to fall asleep will not help you. Try reading, watching a movie, listening to a book on tape, or light music. Don't watch the TV because it gives you the time!

Curtail time in bed:

Most insomniacs stay in bed longer than they should. This makes sleep shallower and interrupted with many awakenings.

Managing stress:

The stress that stems from common life situations contributes to sleep problems. When this is a problem people develop certain strategies like napping, drinking alcohol at bedtime, and working at night. Once the stress is gone, you have developed a certain habit that disrupts sleep. A relaxing activity around bedtime can help relieve tension and encourage sleep. Think about your problems and purpose a few solutions. Talk with a friend or colleague to "air out" troubling issues. Try relaxing exercises or meditation.

Designate "Worry Time:"

Set aside a particular time for worry. This time is designated to sorting out problems and coming up with solutions. Set aside 30 minutes in the evening to sit alone and undisturbed. Try writing down your problems, maybe on 3x5 note cards, and then sort them by priority. Look at each card and formulate a plan to solve the problem. While not all worries have easy solutions, making a plan to remedy them helps yield results. The next morning review your cards or list and start working on your plans.

Summary:

Good sleep hygiene can improve sleep. If you have suffered from sleeplessness for four to six weeks, and you have tried modifying your sleep and daytime habits as described earlier, it is time to consider seeking help from your doctor.