

20 tips for better sleep

Everyone has trouble sleeping now and then. If insomnia or waking up frequently in the night is a problem for you, read on for 20 tried and tested ways to ensure you get a good night's rest.

How to get a good night's rest

Set your alarm for the same time every morning.. Don't be tempted to sleep in, even if you had a late night. Getting up at the same time each day (and going to bed at roughly the same time each night), helps program your body to sleep better.

Ban screens from the bedroom

Artificial blue light from screens affects the body's internal clock and acts as a stimulant. Switch off the TV and don't use laptops, smartphones or tablet computers an hour before bed.

Have a milky drink

The calcium in milk helps your body to process tryptophan, an amino acid that manufactures sleep-triggering melatonin, while the routine of actually making the drink lets your brain know it's time for sleep.

Workout early evening

Exercise (enough to get sweaty) helps relieve stress and releases feel-good chemicals. The best time to work out is 4pm-7pm. Any later and your body temperature and adrenaline levels could be too high.

Take a bath

Enjoy a long, hot soak in the tub an hour or so before bedtime. The warm water will help to relax you. Add lavender or lilac-scented bath oil to reduce stress and promote relaxation.

Hide your alarm clock

Knowing that you have to get up in a few hours could make you feel anxious, and less able to relax. Don't watch the minutes go by - hide the alarm clock and you're more likely to nod off.

Check the temperature

Your bedroom should be comfortably cool, around 65 degrees Fahrenheit (18 degrees Celsius). If you feel hot, switch to a lighter duvet or sleep with the window open. If it's too cold, your body won't be able to relax as it has to work hard to protect its core temperature.

Block out the noise

If you have problems dropping off but tend to sleep well once you do, try wearing ear plugs.

Change your mattress

It's hard to enjoy a good night's sleep on a mattress that's too soft or too hard. Experts at The Sleep Council in the UK recommend buying a new mattress after about seven years, which equates to more than 20,000 hours of use.

Cut back on caffeine

Don't drink tea or coffee after 2pm. Both are stimulants which interfere with the process of falling asleep. Six hours after your last cup of coffee, half the caffeine will still be in your system. Remember that cola and energy drinks contain caffeine too.

Don't drink alcohol

Alcohol makes it easier to fall asleep initially but results in poorer quality sleep. Studies suggest that having a drink before bed will can cause you to wake up every 90 minutes or so throughout the night.

Quit smoking

Research shows that smokers take longer to fall asleep and have more disrupted sleep once they do.

Take Valerian

Before you resort to sleeping tablets, try a herbal remedy. Valerian is widely used for insomnia and most effective if taken over a few weeks.

Supplements to try

Hop extract acts as a mild sedative and may help those with busy lives who find it hard to “switch off” at night. You might also like to try magnesium. Known as nature’s tranquilizer, it has a calming effect on the body. As always, check with your doctor on adding supplements.

Learn to relax

If your mind is racing with thoughts from the day, try listening to relaxing music, meditating or doing some gentle yoga before bed.

Write down your worries

If you’re going through a difficult time or are busy at work, it’s easy to feel overwhelmed. Try writing down your worries or making a list of things you need to do. Once you’ve written the list, put it away.

Don't lie awake worrying

If you’ve been awake for a while, it’s better to get up and do something rather than lie there worrying that you can’t sleep. Try going to another room or reading a book (nothing work related) until you feel sleepy again.

Dim the lights

Bright light will wake you up. Dim the lights 30 minutes before bed.

Switch off

Try relaxing each body part in turn. Lie on your back, then tense and relax your toes, saying ‘goodnight’ to them, then your calves, legs and so on. Once you get to your head, visualize going into your ‘control room’ and flicking off switches to various parts of your body.

Eat a banana

Bananas contain tryptophan which stimulates the production of melatonin and serotonin in the brain. They also contain magnesium, a natural muscle relaxant.