



To Bed, Perhaps To Sleep: Getting a Good Night's Rest

Many seniors believe that sleep disturbances are an inevitable part of aging. Insomnia, however, can affect anyone. In a 2003 poll by the National Sleep Foundation, two-thirds of Americans reported frequent sleep problems.

Sleep disorders can affect when or if we fall asleep, the length of time we sleep (too much or too little), and the quality of our slumber. A variety of factors can disrupt the natural sleep cycle, including physical and mental-health issues, and lifestyle factors such as smoking, caffeine intake or lack of exercise.

Insomnia is most often a symptom of an underlying problem, and effective treatments are available. In addition, most tips for alleviating sleeplessness are based on common sense. If you need a good night's rest, the following steps cost only willpower to see them through:

- 1. Avoid the obvious culprits.** Caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, over-the-counter medications such as nasal decongestants and antihistamines, a big meal, or large quantity of liquids can trigger sleeplessness, especially right before bedtime.
- 2. Practice healthy habits.** Nutritious meals, plenty of water, regular exercise (such as walking 20 minutes a day), and fresh air and sunshine, are practical, healthy habits that enhance a good night's rest and promote better mental and physical health.
- 3. Socialize with friends.** At its worst, social isolation can lead to loneliness, boredom, depression, and poor physical and mental health. These can interfere with sleep. Socialization helps keep our minds active, promotes well-being and keeps us feeling connected.

4. **Respect the sanctity of the bedroom.** A person's bedroom should be for sleeping and sex. Paying bills, balancing the checkbook, doing work-related activities and watching television weaken the experience of the bedroom as a place to rest.
5. **Enhance the physical environment.** If too much light or noise distract from a good night's rest, make adjustments that lessen their impact. A cool, dark, clean and uncluttered room; a good firm mattress; and comfortable sheets and bedding enhance your ability to relax into sleep.
6. **Prepare for bedtime.** Creating special bedtime routines can increase a positive psychological correlation between these activities and sleep. A hot bath or foot soak, reading a book or listening to a favorite CD can provide pleasant relaxation before bed.
7. **Avoid anxiety-provoking activities.** Dealing with financial woes, talking to a disgruntled family member or even watching the nightly news before bedtime should be avoided.
8. **Limit daytime naps and "rests."** Limit naps to 20-30 minutes once a day, or avoid them altogether. Resist being a couch potato. Get up and move around!
9. **Don't toss and turn.** If after 15 or 20 minutes sleep doesn't come, get out of bed. Find an activity in another room— watching television, reading a book, working a puzzle— that provides distraction and relaxation.
10. **Call the doctor.** If insomnia persists, consult a physician with expertise in sleep disorders.

Sleep deprivation affects every aspect of our lives. Breaking the insomnia cycle requires effort and possible medical intervention, but the reward is worth it.

For more information about insomnia, contact:

- www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncsdr/index.htm, the National Center for Sleep Disorders Research, (301) 435-0199
- www.sleepfoundation.org: the National Sleep Foundation, (202) 347-3471

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