

## Get a Good Night Sleep: an Antidote for Stress



According to the National Sleep Foundation, the amount of sleep people need varies. Most healthy adults need an average of 8 hours of sleep a night. Others need to get 10 hours to perform at their best. The amount of sleep we need may vary, but we all need good quality sleep to truly restore us.

To get this quality sleep it's important that you not only get enough sleep but that it be for periods of uninterrupted time. This may not seem so easy to do. A National Sleep Foundation poll found that 60 percent of American adults experience sleep difficulties. To discover if you are one of them, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you frequently take more than half an hour to fall asleep at night?
- Do you wake up frequently during the night and then have a hard time falling back to sleep?
- Are you groggy and tired when it is time to get up in the morning?
- Do you find yourself feeling irritable with co-workers and family members when there is really no good reason to be?
- Do you have trouble concentrating or remembering facts?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, you may have problems sleeping, which may in turn decrease your ability to manage stress.

### Basic Strategies For A Good Night Sleep

#### *Don't oversleep*

If you have recurring sleep difficulties, don't oversleep after a poor night's sleep. This is the most crucial rule. Get up at about the same time every day, especially on the morning after you have lost sleep. Sleeping late for just a couple of days can reset your body clock to a different cycle -- you'll be getting sleepy later and waking up later.

#### *Set your body clock*

Light helps restart your body clock to its active daytime phase. So, when you get up, go outside and get some sunlight. Or if that is difficult, turn on all the lights in your room. Walk around for a few minutes. The calves of your legs act as pumps and get blood circulating, carrying more oxygen to your brain to help get you going.

#### *Exercise*

Keep physically active during the day. This is especially important the day after a bad night sleep. When you sleep less, you should be more active during the day. Strenuous exercise (brisk walking, swimming, jogging, squash, etc.) in late afternoon seems to promote more restful sleep. Also, people experiencing sleep difficulties tend to be too inactive a couple of hours before bed, so do some gentle exercise. Some gentle stretching helps many people.

### *Don't nap*

If you have recurring sleep problems, do not take any naps the day after you've lost sleep. When you feel sleepy, get up and do something. Walk, make the bed, or do your errands. While working, get up regularly (every 30 minutes, or more often if necessary) to stretch. That will increase the flow of oxygen to your brain and help you to be more alert. Taking naps can throw off your natural sleep cycle, increasing sleep difficulties.

### *Set a bedtime schedule*

First, try to go to bed at about the same time every night. Be regular. Most people get hungry at 7 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m. because they have eaten at those times for years. Going to bed at about the same time every night can make sleep as regular as hunger.

Second, go to bed later when you are having trouble sleeping. If you are only getting five hours of sleep a night during your insomnia period, that is the time of your sleep difficulties, do not go to bed until just five hours before your wake-up time. For instance, if you have been waking up at 7 a.m., do not go to bed until 2 a.m. No naps! Make the time you spend in bed sleep time.

### *Develop a bedtime routine*

Do not get into any stimulating discussions or activities a half hour or hour before bed. Do something that is relaxing -- read "light" material, listen to music that is quiet, watch a mindless TV show (not the news if it disturbs you). Some people sleep better in a clean and neat environment, so they like to straighten and clean their room just before going to bed. Find your own sleep-promoting routine.

### *Warm bath, yes; shower, no*

Take a long, hot bath before going to bed. This helps relax and soothe your muscles. Showers, on the other hand, tend to wake you up.

### *List "gotta do's"*

Keep a pad and pencil handy. If you think of something you want to remember, jot it down. Then let the thought go. There will be no need to lie awake worrying about remembering it.

### *Stretch and relaxation*

Some people find that a gentle stretching routine for several minutes just before getting into bed helps induce sleep. Others practice relaxation techniques.

### *To eat or not to eat*

Schedule your last meal of the day at least four hours before bedtime so your digestive system will be reasonably quiet by the time you are ready to sleep.

### *Warm milk?*

It helps some people to have a glass of milk at bedtime. Milk has an essential amino acid, tryptophan, which stimulates the brain chemical serotonin, believed to play a key role in inducing sleep.

### *Avoid caffeine and tyrosine-rich foods from late afternoon on*

Caffeine, a chemical in coffee, colas, chocolate, etc., causes hyperactivity and wakefulness. Some sleep laboratories encourage people to avoid such tyrosine-laden foods as fermented cheeses (cheddar is about the worst; cottage cheese and yogurt are ok), ripe avocados, some imported beers, and fermented meats (bologna, pepperoni, salami).

## Is Your Environment Conducive to Getting a Good Night Sleep?

### *Room temperature*

Sleep in a cool room. Pile on another blanket rather than turn up the heat.

### *Humidity*

Even a little thing like a dry throat may make sleeping more difficult. Most heating systems dry the air in your bedroom, so borrow a humidifier to see if it will help. Keeping heat down and having a window open can also keep humidity up.

### *Noise*

Some people seem to sleep better if there is a white noise -- a fan running, for example, in the background. For others, noise can interrupt sleep. There are many tapes of sounds that aid sleep by quieting the mind, emotions, and body. If desperate, you might try ear plugs.

Adapted from How to Get A Good Night's Sleep, University Counseling Services, Kansas State University