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Getting the Sleep You Need

Are you getting the sleep you need? Most experts agree that no one should sleep less than 7.5 hours per night, and most of us should be sleeping closer to 9 hours a night. After making a few simple changes to my bedroom and daily routine, I am getting a better night's sleep.



Sleep, along with proper nutrition, exercise, and getting adjusted, is integral to how you feel while you are awake. During sleep our bodies recharge, repair damage, and reset our hormone levels. When we don't get enough sleep all aspects of our bodies day-to-day operations are off. Sleep debt (getting less sleep than you need) can lead to an increased risk of cancer, diabetes, obesity, accelerated aging, and a feeling of lethargy and depression.

Ever since the invention of the light bulb gave us the ability to create a brightly lit environment at any hour, we have not been getting enough restful sleep. Before lighting, most people went to bed shortly after sundown, and woke the next morning with the gradual lightening of the eastern sky. That cadence of dark and light is the natural trigger for melatonin and serotonin production, hormones responsible for deep restful sleep.

Melatonin helps regulate other hormones and maintains the body's circadian rhythm, an internal 24-hour time-keeping system that plays a critical role in determining when we fall asleep and when we wake up. Young children have the highest levels of nighttime melatonin, and as we age, our levels of melatonin decline. This may explain why many older adults have disrupted sleep patterns and tend to go to bed and wake up earlier than when they were younger.

Melatonin, also called the "dark" hormone, is only made after your body has been exposed to very bright light in the day and then relatively complete darkness at night. Exposure to excessive light in the evening or too little light during the day can disrupt the body's normal melatonin cycles. Jet lag, shift work, and poor vision can disrupt melatonin cycles, as can exposure to low-frequency electromagnetic fields common in household appliances.

Optimizing the production of melatonin and serotonin is key to a good night's sleep and waking the next morning feeling refreshed. Here are a few tips and strategies to optimizing melatonin:

Establish and keep a bedtime routine. Find something that helps you relax and do it every night before going to bed. A hot bath or shower to warm and relax your body, meditation, or aromatherapy may be helpful. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, 7 days a week. This will establish a rhythm that makes it easier to get to sleep. If you lay awake with your mind racing, journaling might be helpful. Getting those thoughts out on paper will help you to let them go. Putting your work away at least two hours before going to bed will also aid you in transitioning to sleep mode.

Get to bed as early as possible. Many of our bodies' systems, including our adrenals, do their repair and recovery from 11PM to 1AM. If you are awake at this time the processes are hindered which further disrupts your health.

Sleep in complete darkness. Darkness in the evening is one of the triggers that cause your pineal gland to start melatonin and serotonin production and keep it up until the morning light. The darker your room the better your sleep will be. Ideally that would be "I can't see my hand in front of my face" darkness, which can be achieved with blackout shades and removing all light sources from the bedroom, such as alarm clock displays. This will also help reduce the anxiety of looking at the clock and seeing 3:00am or 4:00am, and trying to get back to sleep. If you have to get up at night to use the bathroom or get a glass of water, try to do it in the dark if at all possible. As soon as you turn on a light, melatonin production stops. Even the smallest bit of light will stop melatonin production.

Remove electronic devices from your bedroom. You likely have a TV, portable phone, CD player or iPod, cell phone, electric alarm clock, radio, or computer in your bedroom. These electronics, particularly the television and computer screens emit energy waves long after they've been turned off. Electromagnetic fields (EMFs) disturb sleep by interrupting the body's own electromagnetic processes. Something as simple as an electric alarm clock or a clock radio near your head can produce high EMF's. Using a battery operated clock is the best option. Electric blankets and electric heating pads emit extraordinarily high EMF's and should be avoided at all costs. To reduce my exposure to EMF's I bought a \$7 battery-operated alarm clock at Target which has a dark face that emits no light (tapping a bar at the top illuminates the display, so I can see what time it is). I also replaced my cordless phone with a standard model, and removed all other electronic devices from my bedroom.



Get adequate exposure to sunlight. Exposure to sunlight increases the bodies' immune system by stimulating the production of vitamin D and works on the light/dark cycle to increase melatonin production at night. The contrast of bright light entering the eye during the day and total darkness at night is the trigger mechanism for the sleep system. For those who wake too early in the morning, the light exposure should be late in the day. For those who have trouble falling asleep at night, light exposure should be in the morning. Here in the Northwest we don't get adequate sunlight in the winter, so full spectrum fluorescent bulbs can be helpful along with taking Vitamin D3 supplements. *I recommend taking 5000 IU of D3 daily.*

Eat a high protein snack and a piece of fruit several (2-3) hours before bed. The protein will provide L-Tryptophan, which is a precursor for both melatonin and serotonin and critical for a good nights sleep. Fruit also provides substances that can help the Tryptophan cross the blood-brain barrier. Avoid snacking in the few hours before bed, especially grains and sugars since these will cause a spike in your blood sugar which inhibits sleep.

Avoid drinking anything 2 hours before bed. This will decrease the likelihood of having to get up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Avoid drinking alcohol. Alcohol tends to keep you from falling into the deeper levels of sleep where it does most of its healing, and you wake feeling tired. Try to avoid caffeine after noon due to its slow metabolism by some people, which can keep you from falling asleep later that night. *Many diet and weight loss pills contain caffeine.

Get plenty of exercise and lose weight. The benefits of regular exercise are many and you can add a good night's sleep to that list. Thirty minutes of exercise every day will help you fall asleep quicker and sleep better, but do not exercise too close to bedtime or it will keep you up. Excess weight can contribute to many conditions that decrease restful sleep, including sleep apnea. Some studies are even showing a correlation between getting a good nights sleep and weight loss. The body does most of its healing and growing during the hours that you are asleep. With regular exercise your body will continue to burn fat while you sleep, increasing your weight loss.

Keep your bedroom cool. Keeping the temperature of the bedroom below 68 degrees F will keep you from overheating at night and aid relaxation and deep sleep.

Keep your bed for sleeping. When you watch TV or do work in bed you may have trouble mentally transitioning to sleep mode and relaxing. Try to keep work outside the bedroom, and keep the bed for sleeping.

Choose the right mattress. I recommend sleeping on a Tempur-pedic bed which conforms exactly to every curve and angle of your body while supporting you in perfect alignment and allowing your shoulders and hips to sink into the mattress just enough so that support is provided along your entire body. Conventional mattresses exert a counter-pressure that contorts your body into unnatural positions, restricting blood flow and causing pressure points which results in tossing and turning, pain, and a lack of quality sleep.

Rearrange your bedroom furnishings. Feng Shui is the ancient art and science of placement. How we place the furnishings in our immediate environment, and then how we place ourselves in the larger environment effects many things, including health. After my wife changed the placement of our beds four years ago, everyone reported sleeping better, even the teenagers! To learn more about Feng shui, visit: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/candace-vorhaus/sleep-tips-feng-shui-a-so b 411009.html?page=2&show_comment_id=37921579](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/candace-vorhaus/sleep-tips-feng-shui-a-so-b-411009.html?page=2&show_comment_id=37921579)

I just love the simple practical and inexpensive solutions for chronic problems that address foundation causes. If you are having sleep problems, whether you are not able to fall asleep, wake up too often, don't feel well-rested when you wake up in the morning, or simply want to improve the quality and quantity of your sleep, try as many of the techniques as possible to get the good night's sleep you need.