

7 Top tips to get a better night's sleep



Do you struggle to get to sleep? Or wake up several times during the night? Do you seem to go to bed later and later? Feel tired in the morning rather than rested? You're not alone, many people experience problems with their sleep. The good news is there are things you can do to improve this.

Good sleep is really important for work performance and our physical and mental wellbeing.

If we get less sleep than we need we become tired, irritable and less able to function. Lack of sleep also reduces our ability to concentrate, remember and think creatively – all of which are vital for work. This in turn can impact on our mood as we feel less able to cope with life, which in turn increases anxiety and disrupts our sleep further. All of this usually stops once the 'sleep debt' is repaid.

If you're having problems with your sleep, try not to worry about it too much. Sleeping for eight hours in one go isn't something we, as humans, do naturally – from an evolutionary point of view sleeping in one long block makes no sense.

Being still and unaware of our surroundings would have made us easy prey to other animals. We have to train our bodies to sleep at night – it's something that we had to learn as babies, and we can learn it again.

Following these top tips below should help you improve your sleep:

1. Environment

Make sure your bedroom is as ideal a place for sleep as you can make it. Remove any sources of stimulation, use heavy curtains to block out light if possible and make sure your bed is comfortable. Many people find that washing their bed sheets more regularly at times of stress can make their bed feel fresher and welcoming which can improve sleep.

2. Time

You can retrain your body by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day (even at weekends). Avoid the temptation to nap or sleep in – it will take a week or two but your body will adjust and settle into a regular sleep pattern.

3. Diet / alcohol

Don't eat late. Avoid rich foods (e.g. those high in fats and sugars) and drinking caffeine late at night. Eating foods high in tryptophan with some complex carbohydrates can help – some people find that hot milk and honey, or yoghurt and seeds can encourage sleep. It can be tempting if you struggle to get to sleep to use alcohol or drugs. While this may help you fall to sleep, as your body metabolises the alcohol or drugs later in the night, it will wake you up and make it even more difficult for you to get back to sleep. Using alcohol and drugs in this way is also likely to impact on your mood and ultimately raise your anxiety levels further.

4. Exercise

Exercise helps to get rid of the adrenaline that anxiety stimulates, it also regulates our breathing and encourages muscles to relax. However, you should avoid exercising late in the evening – as you need to allow time for your body to recuperate and relax after exercise before going to bed.

5. Stimulation

TV, computer and phone screens alter melatonin levels, which is the chemical that helps your brain decide if it is day or night. You should leave a gap of at least one hour between watching a screen and going to bed. Also ensure that you leave an hour's gap between finishing study and going to bed to give your brain a chance to wind down.

6. Relaxation

Try to find something that relaxes you before you go to bed. Many people find soothing music helps, you may also want to try some breathing exercises

7. Get up

If after 20 minutes you aren't asleep, don't stay there feeling frustrated – get out of bed and do something practical that you need to do but don't enjoy (e.g. reading a really dull textbook). Don't reward yourself with food or a drink – this will motivate your brain to try to get you out of bed again

Written by Joanna Baker
Produced by University of Derby, Student Minds and King's College London