



Sleep Hygiene: Creating Healthy Sleep Habits for a Healthy Life

Sleep hygiene is just a term used to describe good sleep habits. Sleep is a vitally important part of daily living, but so many of us take the power of sleep for granted. When you sleep, your body is getting the opportunity to recharge. If you don't get enough of it, you're never going to feel powered-up, refreshed, and energized.

Take a moment and imagine an RC car (remote-controlled car). When an RC car has completed charging, it runs optimally. It's fast, "perky," and responds to the controls on the remote well. When the battery starts to drain, however, the RC car starts to "act funky." It's more sluggish, doesn't go as fast, doesn't respond to the controller as well, and eventually, just gives out altogether.

In many ways, your body is like an RC car. Every time you get a full night's rest, you are charging your battery. When your battery is fully charged, you feel refreshed, rested, and energized. But, if you only charge your battery half-way, you might feel tired, slow, or cranky. If your battery is out of juice, then you find yourself struggling to complete even the simplest tasks, constantly yawning, and feeling incredibly fatigued.

Without enough sleep, your body (just like an RC car) can't run right. What's worse, without enough sleep, you'll find yourself getting sick, having difficulty concentrating, feeling irritable, and having trouble processing memories. Moreover, chronic lack of sleep has been linked to medical problems such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, AND poor mental health!

As you can see, healthy sleep habits are essential to a healthy life and good mental health. If you want to reduce your stress and eliminate your anxiety, then good sleep hygiene has got to be part of the prescription! It's amazing what good sleep can do. Try it for yourself!

Tips for Healthy Sleep Hygiene

There are several tips and tricks to help yourself develop healthy sleep hygiene. Don't get overwhelmed by everything on this list. Pick 3 things you want to adopt and give it a try for 2 weeks. During those 2 weeks, evaluate how your sleep is going. Do you see improvements? If yes, that's great! If not, take time to evaluate what's working and what's not, and try again.

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- **Have a Bedtime** – Bedtimes aren’t just for kids! As adults, we can benefit from having bedtimes too. Our brain LOVES patterns and routines. Having a consistent bedtime that you adhere to every day (including the weekends!) trains your brain to get sleepy at a certain hour. This, in turn, makes it easier to fall asleep.
- **Avoid Alcohol, Caffeine, & Nicotine** – Research shows us that these 3 things (alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine) can make it difficult to fall sleep at night. Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants, meaning that they “wake your brain up” and make it feel alert. That’s the opposite of what you want when you’re trying to get some sleep. Alcohol, on the other hand, doesn’t make it more difficult to fall asleep. Instead, alcohol impacts the quality of your sleep. That means that you might fall asleep quickly and get a full 8 hours, but the sleep you’re getting isn’t very good. As such, you’ll still wake up in the morning feeling groggy and tired. Avoid using these substances for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed.
- **Have a Sleep Sanctuary** – Sounds fancy, doesn’t it? Make sure that wherever you sleep, it’s comfortable. That means making sure you have pillows that you enjoy, a mattress that doesn’t hurt your back, and blankets that keep you warm if you’re cold. You also want to make sure that windows have shades or covers to keep out the early morning light (or any annoying street lights), and consider earplugs for any outside noise that continuously interrupts your sleep. Find a temperature that feels comfortable to you (cooler is usually better). Finally, cover any little lights in your room that might make it difficult for you to sleep.
- **Set Bed Boundaries** – Keep your bed (and ideally your whole bedroom) for sleeping and sexual activities only. Remember, your brain loves patterns, which helps it form neural connections and associations. By keeping your bed for sleep and sex only, your brain forms an association between your bed and sleep. This means that, when you get in bed, your brain will understand that it’s time to sleep and it will begin triggering the bodily processes needed to help you fall asleep.
- **Say “No” to Screens** – Research shows that dabbling on electronic devices before bed can actually stimulate the brain and make it harder to fall asleep. There is suspicion that the “blue light” from electronic devices is the primary guilty party here. The truth is, however, that good storytelling or games that engross your attention are also culprits! Think of the last time you read a REALLY good book (“Just 1 more page!”), watched a juicy TV show (“Just 1 more episode!”), or played a videogame that you really liked (“Just 5 more minutes!”). All of these things can engage the brain, stimulate the mind, and make it harder to fall asleep. Best practice is to turn off screens 1 hour before bed for best results.



- **Nighttime Journaling** – This tip is particularly helpful for the worriers! Have you ever tried to fall asleep, but your brain just keeps on worrying and worrying and worrying about EVERYTHING! This keeps many people up at night, tossing and turning. Consider getting a journal, notebook, or sheet of paper, and write down all those worries. Get them out of your head and onto paper. There’s something therapeutic about writing out all your concerns and problems. When you do this, something shifts in the brain. Part of the reason your brain floods you with thoughts before bed is because it doesn’t want you to forget. When you write it all down, your brain knows that all of those worries are on paper now, allowing it to relax because it knows you won’t forget. Journaling is also a great tool to release stress, process the day, and reflect on positive moments.
- **Mind Your Tummy** – Remember that the body and mind are interconnected. That means that, not only does your diet impact your body’s health, it also impacts your sleep. Better nutrition means better sleep. Period! But the timing of when you eat can also impact your sleep. Have you ever tried to fall asleep on an empty stomach? It’s incredibly hard, isn’t it? Consider having a light, healthy snack before bed. Make sure it’s nothing too big or heavy. It’s often recommended that a warm glass of milk is a perfect snack. It’s filling, fairly healthy, and contains tryptophan, which is a natural sleep inducer. (Go milk for the win!)
- **Take a Hot Bath** – Consider taking a hot bath or shower 1-2 hours before going to bed. Research shows that sleepiness is connected to a drop in your body temperature. As such, taking a hot bath (which elevates your body’s temperature) can help induce sleepiness as your body’s temperature slowly drops again following the scrub in the tub.
- **Have a Sleep Routine** – Remember how we talked about the brain loving routine? Here it is again! When you have a bedtime routine, you train your brain to associate specific activities with sleep. Have you ever seen a mother use a bedtime routine to help her children get sleepy? There’s a reason why... because it works! But sleep routines aren’t just for kids. They work wonders for adults too! Consider creating your own sleep ritual to train your brain to fall asleep.
 - **Example:** Take a hot shower, brush your teeth, and then practice breathing exercises for 15 minutes. Then, lights out!
- **Ban the Clock!** – Frequently, when we have trouble falling asleep, we tend to watch the clock a lot. But this only produces stress and anxiety as we watch the



hour get later and later, which then triggers anxious thoughts (“I’m never going to fall asleep,” “I’m only going to get 5 hours of sleep tonight,” “It’s sooo late,” etc.). These thoughts only make you feel more anxious, which then makes it even harder to fall asleep. If you’re having trouble, avoid watching the clock tick! Instead, if you’re having trouble falling asleep, practice relaxation exercises in the dark (lights will stimulate your brain). Try meditations and/or practicing deep breathing exercises. Keep doing them until you finally fall asleep.

- **Exercise during the Day** – Exercise is a helpful tool to help with sleep. Trouble sleeping or restless sleep is often caused by a build-up of cortisol (the stress hormone) in the body. When you exercise, you help your body burn off and get rid of the excess cortisol. Incorporate some exercise into your routine approximately 4 hours before bed. This helps you burn off that cortisol but also gives your brain time to come down from the natural “high” of the endorphins your brain releases when you exercise.
- **Engage in Relaxation** – This has to be one of the BEST sleep habits you can pick! Frequently, when we’re struggling to fall asleep or stay asleep, it’s because we are worried, anxious, or stressed. Practicing a relaxation exercise can really help calm your mind and set the mood for restful sleep. All you have to do is get ready for bed, turn off the lights, and get tucked into your covers. Then, pick a relaxation technique to practice such as: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation. Do this every night for maximum results.



References

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