

# Sleep Hygiene – Are You Getting Enough Sleep?

Sleep is something we usually don't think about unless we are not getting enough or we are experiencing some sleep difficulty. However, we all recognize and accept that sleep is a necessary component to good physical and mental health. **Sleep Hygiene** includes those things we can do to promote good sleep habits and therefore maximize the benefits of restful sleep. The following are just a few of the important tips recommended by the National Sleep Foundation (NSF) to promote good sleep hygiene and advocacy.

- **Maintain a regular bed and awake time schedule including weekends.**  
Our sleep-wake cycle is regulated by a "circadian clock" in our brain and the body's need to balance both sleep time and wake time. A regular waking time in the morning strengthens the circadian function and can help with sleep onset at night. That is also why it is important to keep a regular bedtime and wake-time, even on the weekends when there is the temptation to sleep-in.
- **Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine such as soaking in a hot bath and/or listening to soothing music.**  
Relaxing, routine activity right before bedtime conducted away from bright lights helps separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress or anxiety which can make it more difficult to fall asleep, get sound and deep sleep or remain asleep. Avoid arousing activities before bedtime like working, paying bills, engaging in competitive games or family problem-solving. Some studies suggest that soaking in hot water (such as a hot tub or bath) before retiring to bed can ease the transition into deeper sleep, but it should be done early enough that you are no longer sweating or over-heated. If you are unable to avoid tension and stress, it may be helpful to learn relaxation therapy from a trained professional. Finally, avoid exposure to bright before bedtime because it signals the neurons that help control the sleep-wake cycle that it is time to awaken, not to sleep.
- **Create a sleep conducive environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.**  
Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep . cool, quiet, dark, comfortable and free of interruptions. Also make your bedroom reflective of the value you place on sleep. Check your room for noise or other distractions, including a bed partner's sleep disruptions such as snoring, light, and a dry or hot environment. Consider using blackout curtains, eye shades, ear plugs, "white noise," humidifiers, fans and other devices.
- **Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows.**  
Make sure your mattress is comfortable and supportive. The one you have been using for years may have exceeded its life expectancy . about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. Have comfortable pillows and make the room attractive and inviting for sleep but also free of allergens that might affect you and objects that might cause you to slip or fall if you have to get up during the night.
- **Use your bedroom for only sleep and intimacy. Avoid distractions like work materials, computers or televisions.**  
It is best to take work materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment. Use your bed only for sleep and intimacy to strengthen the association between bed and sleep. If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping, omit it from your bedtime routine. For example, if looking at a bedroom clock makes you anxious about how much time you have before you must get up; move the clock out of sight. Do not engage in activities that cause you anxiety and prevent you from sleeping.
- **Finish eating at least 2-3 hours before your regular bedtime.**  
Eating or drinking too much may make you less comfortable when settling down for bed. It is best to avoid a heavy meal too close to bedtime. Also, spicy foods may cause heartburn, which leads to difficulty falling asleep and discomfort during the night. Try to restrict fluids close to bedtime to prevent nighttime awakenings to go to the bathroom, though some people find milk or herbal, non-caffeinated teas to be soothing and a helpful part of a bedtime routine.
- **Exercise regularly. It is best to complete your workout at least a few hours before your regular bedtime.**

In general, exercising regularly makes it easier to fall asleep and contributes to sounder sleep. However, exercising sporadically or right before going to bed will make falling asleep more difficult. In addition to making us more alert, our body temperature rises during exercise, and takes as much as 6 hours to begin to drop. A cooler body temperature is associated with sleep onset... Finish your exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime. Late afternoon exercise is the perfect way to help you fall asleep at night.

- **Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol prior to bedtime.**

Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants that interfere with your ability to fall asleep, and stay asleep. Coffee, tea, soft drinks, hot coco, chocolate and some over-the-counter medicines contains caffeine. Cigarettes, cigars, and some drugs contain nicotine. Although alcohol may help you fall asleep, it significantly interferes with the quality of your sleep and often makes you wake up more in the second half of the night.

Everyone will experience times when it is difficult falling asleep or staying asleep. This does not necessarily indicate a sleep disorder, as there are a number of environmental and psychological factors that can influence our sleep patterns. If it does not persist for a week or longer, then it is most likely related to something that has changed in our environment or life. If you are having problems falling asleep, it is generally recommended that after 30 minutes you not stay in bed tossing and turning. Rather, get up and involve yourself in a relaxing activity such as listening to soothing music or reading until you are feeling sleepy. Remember, the goal is to clear your mind, not to use the time to solve your daily problems.

If sleep difficulties persist, it is wise to consult a physician. Maintaining a sleep journal that tracks your sleep patterns and the problems you are encountering can help your physician to understand the situation and develop an appropriate treatment plan. More information about sleep hygiene and sleep disorders can be found at the NSF website [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org). The NSF is an independent, nonprofit organization in the USA whose objectives are to improve public health and safety by achieving understanding of sleep and sleep disorders, and by supporting sleep-related education, research.

Articles available include:

- ABCs of ZZZZs - -
- When you Can't Sleep
- Let Sleep Work For You
- How Much Sleep Do We Really Need?
- Ask the Expert . Teens and Sleep
- Sleep Report Card
- Women and Sleep

Another helpful website is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

Your EAP can also help you to address those issues that can often interfere with your sleep. Contact us at 800-222-8590. All services provided through your EAP are confidential and prepaid for by your employer.