



A Guide to Sleep

Ways to help you get a better night's sleep



The power of sleep is simply mind-boggling. There has been much research* carried out over the last few decades that has highlighted the incredible benefits that sleep provides. In fact, some scientists are so sure of the healing and positive benefits of sleep that they are urging doctors to prescribe it. (Note, this isn't sleeping pills they're talking about here, but actual good nights' sleep!)

It's helps us form memories, as well as help weed out the information we don't need to store; it helps our creativity and our ability to learn; it boosts our immunity, our metabolic rate, our brain function. It helps our mental and emotional health.

But, on the flip side, impaired sleep can have damaging effects to our health and wellbeing. It affects our energy levels, emotional state, concentration and alertness

(though, worryingly, we don't realise this, often underestimating how impaired our performance is). It has been linked to many neurological and psychiatric conditions, such as Alzheimer's, anxiety, depression, and bipolar. It can also affect every physiological system of the body, contributing to numerous diseases such as cancer, heart disease, infertility, obesity and diabetes.

It doesn't sound good, does it? Yet many of us suffer from bad nights' sleep, and getting to sleep (and staying asleep!) can be a struggle. We certainly don't get the recommended eight hours a night. So, what can we do to improve our chances?

* The wonderful and eye-opening book *Why We Sleep* by Matthew Walker outlines all the latest research. Highly recommended.



Top tips for better sleep

Are you a 'morning lark' or 'night owl'?

Whether you are a morning person or someone who thrives more in the later hours of the day will affect how and when you sleep. This is down to our internal rhythm and it's different for everyone. It isn't something we can change; in fact, it's strongly determined by our genes. But understanding your rhythm will give you insight into when you work and function best, and maybe give you ideas of how to structure your days, including when you should aim to sleep.

Keep regular sleeping hours

Try to establish a regular sleeping pattern by going to bed and waking up at roughly the same time. By setting a routine, you are preparing your brain and body for sleep and letting yourself know that it's time to wind down.



Create a restful sleeping environment

Try and keep your bedroom a peaceful place by controlling the noise, light, temperature and keeping it free of any distractions. Dark, cool, gadget-free environments are the way to go. If you have pets that sleep on your bed, consider keeping them out of your bedroom as this may interrupt your sleep during the night.

Make sure your bed is comfortable

If you suffer from lower back pain, use pillows to ease the pain and help you have a more comfortable sleep. It might also help to keep your neck in a neutral position to maintain a proper posture which reduces the probability of neck pain, which can impact on your sleep.



Exercise regularly

Regular exercise reduces the risk of insomnia. Studies show that getting thirty minutes of exercise at least five days a week is enough to significantly improve sleep quality.

Don't overindulge

Heavy, rich, fried or spicy foods may trigger indigestion and carbonated beverages and citrus fruits may also interfere with your ability to sleep.

Top Tip

Avoid working out in the three hours before bedtime.



Top Tip

Try to choose light, easily digestible snacks before bedtime like crackers and cheese, fruit, or cereal with milk.



Cut down on caffeine, nicotine and alcohol

Caffeine, alcohol and nicotine can all disturb your sleep patterns and, therefore, it is important to reduce consumption in the lead up to going to sleep. Watch out for hidden sources of caffeine such as chocolate and tea.

Back off blue light

It has been shown that the use of bright screens on laptops, phones and even digital clocks can negatively affect sleep.

Top Tip

If you enjoy a hot beverage before bed, try a night-time tea.



Top Tip

Give yourself some tech-free time an hour or so before bed to help prepare for sleep.



Try to relax before going to bed

Different things work for different people but listening to music, reading a book, or carrying out breathing exercises, meditation, muscle relaxation or visualisation could help you unwind before you go to bed.

Write away your worries

Writing down your thoughts and worries or making a list of actions for the next day could be a useful way of letting go and switching off.

Top Tip

If you regularly struggle to sleep, it might also be helpful to keep a sleep diary or download a sleep cycle app to track your sleep patterns.



Get the right sunlight exposure

Research says that sunlight exposure is a key part to regulating your sleep patterns, so try and get outside into natural light for at least thirty minutes a day.

If you can't sleep, get up

Clock watching increases anxiety. Therefore, if you are struggling to sleep, avoid the temptation to watching the clock (you could even turn it to face away from you), and instead, do something productive to pass the time, such as light chores or reading a book, until you feel sleepy.

