

## Sleep hygiene

### What is Sleep Hygiene?

'Sleep hygiene' is the term used to describe good sleep habits. Considerable research has gone into developing a set of guidelines and tips which are designed to enhance good sleeping. There is lots of evidence to suggest that the strategies below can provide long-term solutions to sleep difficulties. There are many medications which are used to treat insomnia, but these tend to be only effective in the short-term. Continuous use of sleeping pills may lead to dependence and interfere with the development of good sleeping habits, independent of medication. This may ultimately prolong sleep difficulties. Talk to your health professional about what is right for you. However, we recommend good sleep hygiene as an important part of treating insomnia – either alone or paired with other strategies, such as medication or cognitive therapy.

### Sleep hygiene tips

- **Get regular.** One of the best ways to train your body to sleep well is going to bed and getting up at the same time every day – even on weekends and days off! Having a regular rhythm will make you feel better by giving your body something to work from.
- **Sleep when sleepy.** Only try to sleep when you actually feel tired or sleepy, rather than spending too much time awake in bed.
- **Get up & try again.** If you haven't been able to get to sleep after 20 minutes or more, get up and do something calming until you feel sleepy. Then, return to bed and try again. You could try sitting quietly on the couch with the lights off, as bright light will tell your brain it is time to wake up. You could also try something boring, like reading the phone book. Avoid anything too stimulating, as this will wake your body up even more.
- **Avoid caffeine & nicotine.** It is best to avoid consuming any caffeine (in coffee, tea, cola drinks, chocolate, and some medications) or nicotine (cigarettes) for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. These substances act as stimulants and interfere with the ability to fall asleep.
- **Bed is for sleeping.** Try not to use your bed for anything other than sleeping and sex. This will help your body associate your bed with sleep. If you use bed as a place to watch TV, eat, read, work on your laptop, or pay your bills, your body will not learn this connection.
- **Avoid alcohol.** It is also best to avoid alcohol for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. Many people believe that alcohol is relaxing and helps them sleep. However, alcohol interrupts the quality of your sleep.

- **No naps.** It is best to avoid taking naps during the day to make sure that you are tired at bedtime. If you can't make it through the day without a nap, make sure it is for less than an hour and before 3pm.
- **Sleep rituals.** You can develop your own rituals of things to inform your body it is time to sleep. Some people find it helpful to do relaxing stretches, or breathing exercises, for 15 minutes before bed. You could also try sitting calmly with a cup of caffeine-free tea.
- **Bathtime.** Having a hot bath 1-2 hours before bedtime can be useful, as it will raise your body temperature. As your body cools you may begin to feel sleepy, as research has shown sleepiness is associated with a fall in body temperature.
- **No clock-watching.** Many people who struggle with sleep tend to watch the clock too much. Frequently checking the clock during the night can wake you up, especially if you turn on the light to read the time. It can also reinforce negative thoughts such as "Oh no, look how late it is. I'll never get to sleep..." or "it's so early - I've only slept for 5 hours, this is terrible!"
- **Use a sleep diary.** A diary can be useful in making sure you have the right facts about your sleep, rather than making assumptions. Because keeping a diary involves clock-watching (see above) it is a good idea to only use it for two weeks. This will give you an idea of what's going on. Then repeat the diary two months later to see how you are progressing.
- **Exercise.** Regular exercise is a good idea to help with good sleep, but try not to do strenuous exercise in the 4 hours before bedtime. Morning walks are a great way to start the day feeling refreshed!
- **Eat right.** A healthy, balanced diet will help you to sleep well but timing is important! Some people find that a very empty stomach at bedtime is distracting, so it can be useful to have a light snack. A heavy meal right before bed can also interrupt sleep. Some people recommend a warm glass of milk, as milk contains tryptophan which is a natural sleep inducer.
- **The right space.** It is very important that your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable for sleeping. A cooler room with enough blankets to stay warm is best. Make sure you have curtains or an eye mask to block out early morning light and earplugs if there is noise outside your room.
- **Keep daytime routine the same.** Even if you have a bad night sleep and are tired it is important that you try to keep your daytime activities the same as you had planned. Don't avoid activities because you feel tired. This can reinforce the insomnia..