

SLEEP & SURVIVAL

Sleep is neither a 'dispensable' nor an option! Going without sleep is not "macho". Instead, it is self-destructive. Potential consequences of sleep deprivation and poor sleep include the following:

- Shortened life spans and higher mortality rates.
- Increased risk of heart disease and stomach problems.
- Irritability, depression.
- In some cases, explosive outbursts and mood swings.
- Increased risk of high speed highway crashes.
- Decreased work performance and memory lapses.
- Marital, social and employment problems.

Gimmicks are no substitute for common sense. Sleeping pills, caffeine, alcohol, "natural remedies" and force of will are not a substitute for adequate, good quality sleep. In fact, they are more likely to become part of the problem than a part of its solution.

SLEEP HYGIENE PRACTICES

First and foremost, protect your need and right to sleep!

Ensure adequate time in bed, free from interruptions and demands. Most adults require 7.5-8 hours. Teenagers and children require even more sleep!

The same applies to night shift workers! They may feel guilty if they do not get up after four hours to run errands, to do tasks around the house, or to let a repairman come in to fix something in the home. But...what would be the response if that same repairman were to insist that a day shift worker get up to let him in at 2 a.m.? Night shift work should not deprive one of basic rights and human necessities.

Keep regular sleep habits! Regularity makes a tremendous difference. Erratic sleep habits prevent training of the "biological clocks" in our brains that help control our alertness and ability to sleep.

Avoid going to bed after midnight unless you work night shift. Many people seem to 'get their second wind' after midnight. They will then have more difficulty falling asleep.

Go to bed prepared to sleep! Avoid vigorous exercise shortly before retiring. It may impede your ability to fall asleep. At the same time, exercise at least several hours before retiring has been shown to be helpful.

Avoid late afternoon/evening naps, and do not allow yourself to doze off while reading or watching television prior to bedtime. Even brief episodes of sleep may interfere with subsequent sleep.

Do not allow yourself to lie in bed worrying about problems or challenges of the upcoming day. If necessary, set aside a 'worry time' some hours before bedtime and tell yourself that any difficulties you cannot resolve during that allotted time can be put on until the next day.

In most cases, the bed should be used for sleep and sex--and not for reading of interesting materials, watching television, working on a laptop, or other activities that may keep one awake. Learn to associate your bed with relaxation and not with activities that will be likely to keep you alert for prolonged periods.

Avoid large meals and excessive fluid intake that may provoke poor sleep, indigestion, heartburn or frequent awakenings to urinate. Any bedtime snacks should be small and consist of non-spicy foods with sedating potential. Examples include peanut butter and dairy products (both are high in tryptophan, an amino acid or "building block of proteins" that tends to increase sleepiness). Many patients also report that apples taken before bedtime increase their sleepiness and ability to doze off promptly.

Caffeine and smoking prior to retiring are additional factors that can worsen one's ability to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Warm baths (not showers) prior to bedtime truly can prove helpful!--as can engaging in relaxing, calming and soothing activities.

Tranquil music composed for sleep induction, waterfalls and light/sound/aromatherapy units often are used effectively to facilitate dozing off into natural sleep.

Make sure that your bedroom is conducive to good sleep!

Ensure a dark environment, unless you are reassured by having a night light in the room. Night shift workers may benefit from use of special curtains and liners that block out light from the outside

Ensure a quiet environment--or, if it works better for you, a soft, low-level noise such as a fan. Use measures to block out outside sounds, or utilize either white noise generators or earplugs that are 'waxy" and capable of being molded to fit the ear canal. If necessary and feasible, especially for night shift workers, utilize an answering machine and unplug the telephone in the bedroom.

Ensure a reasonably cool environment. Overly warm bedrooms are not conducive to quality sleep.

Ensure a comfortable environment. Be sure that your mattress is adequately firm and comfortable. The same comfort considerations will also apply to your pillow.

If you have allergies to dust, dust mites, and other common features of a typical bedroom, take steps to create a relatively allergen-free bedroom. Frequently helpful measures include replacement of old pillows and carpeting, cleaning of ductwork and furnace filters, use of a HEPA filter/air conditioning and keeping pets out of the bedroom if possible and appropriate.

Don't sleep too long! Avoid oversleeping and lying in the bed for prolonged periods after your sleep is completed. Excessive sleep tends to be fragmented, unrefreshing sleep that leaves people feeling worse- and that may then interfere with the following night of sleep. Some individuals require nine hours of sleep, but in adults, longer requirements in the absence of illnesses are unusual. Naps may be beneficial--but for people on a normal day schedule, they are best taken in the early afternoon, and in most cases, should be restricted to less than one hour.

What if you can't get to sleep or return to sleep?

- Realize that frustration and 'trying harder' to fall asleep can be enough to keep anyone awake! The harder one tries, the more elusive sleep becomes. Not caring whether sleep will occur can facilitate its onset. Tell yourself that transient inability to fall asleep should not be frightening, since your body will undoubtedly allow you to fall asleep before lack of sleep would ever become a serious threat to your health
- At such times, don't engage in activities that will render sleep unlikely or impossible! Don't go shopping, do laundry, clean house, read an interesting book or play computer games Do something relaxing to the point of becoming lethargic when you do it. If you find it tedious to read Shakespeare, buy *The Merchant of Venice*!
- In short, distract yourself from thinking about your inability to sleep (or any other stresses in your life) Focus instead on things so inherently boring that you probably won't be able to stay awake long enough to think about them for any significant period of time.
- If you eat a snack at such times, ensure that it is light and contains foods that will promote sleep without causing unwanted weight gain. If you like peanut butter sandwiches and they agree with you, now would be the time to eat one.

Avoid medications if at all possible that can interfere with either sleep or alertness!

- This precaution includes many over the counter remedies and 'natural' (ex: herbal) products. The number of different medications and health foods that can influence one's ability to sleep and one's alertness levels is staggering! Such applies to many classes of drugs that would not be suspected by most people. For example, over the counter nasal sprays are a notorious cause of insomnia.
- **Discuss everything that you are taking (including nonprescription items) with your doctor or pharmacist. Of course, do not discontinue prescribed drugs without the approval and awareness of the physician who prescribed them.**