

How to sleep better

Bath Before Bedtime

A hot bath has been a much-quoted remedy for sleeplessness for years, but how does it work? The body's normal core temperature is about 37.4 degrees Celsius. You might think that raising this temperature in a hot bath is what tricks your body into feeling sleepy. In fact, it is the cooling down that occurs when you get out of the bath that facilitates sleep. It is only recently that the drop in body temperature has been recognised as a trigger for sleep. If you're having trouble sleeping, try having a warm bath about an hour before bedtime.

The Power Of Daylight

If sleeping isn't an issue for you, then how about waking up? Research into daylight reveals that it can be used to help us wake up more effectively. In 2002 scientists identified a group of receptor cells in the eye that regulate the production of a hormone called melatonin. This hormone determines how sleepy or awake a person feels. At night, the body's supply of melatonin will increase, causing us to feel sleepy. At daybreak, even with the eyelids closed, the receptor cells are triggered by the increasing light to signal the brain, and in particular, the pineal gland, to reduce the amount of melatonin in the body. This allows us to feel more alert and awake. By mimicking the qualities of natural light that trigger the receptor cells, scientists can use 'blue' lamps to fool the body into thinking it's naturally awake. These blue lights can help early risers to feel more awake. But for anyone struggling to sleep during daylight hours, dark heavy curtains could help.

Insomnia

Insomnia is a natural part of life, e.g. if you have a driving test the next day, you may find it difficult to sleep the night before. **Chronic Insomnia** plagues people in huge numbers, and once the body has asserted an erratic sleeping pattern, it can be very hard to break. Sleep restriction therapy is one potential method of breaking such patterns. A sufferer is restricted to spending less time in their bedrooms, whether they sleep or not. But it's not easy, as Professor Colin Espie from the University of Glasgow Sleep Centre explains: "People with insomnia will typically spend longer in bed to try and catch up. What we do with sleep restriction is drastically reduce the amount of time they spend in bed. That's a difficult thing to do." The aim of this treatment is to make the subject so tired that their body will be forced to re-establish a normal sleeping pattern. If you're struggling with insomnia, a sleep restriction therapy programme is definitely an option to consider. The key is to stay in the bedroom only to sleep, and always get up at the same time each day. Only consult a doctor if you feel your insomnia has become chronic - lasting more than 3 months.

The Art Of Napping

The nap can be a great way of boosting energy levels, as long as you observe the rules over when you nap, and for how long. Napping consolidates memory, and can be helpful. Naps are most effective when taken in the afternoon between two and five. The optimum nap duration is 30 minutes. Your body will naturally resist attempts to nap between seven and twelve o'clock in the morning, and between six and eight o'clock in the evening. However, if you are suffering from a sleep problem such as Insomnia, it is a good idea to eliminate daytime napping completely.

How To Stop Snoring

It's estimated that 15 million Britons snore. Snoring can be linked to serious health conditions and as it can affect the sleep of more than just the sufferer, it can have a negative effect on relationships. But what causes snoring? During sleep, the muscles controlling our airways can relax, causing the air passage to narrow. As a result, when we breathe, the soft tissues in the mouth, nose and throat vibrate, which we then hear as snoring. Help is at hand though, with a number of over the counter remedies available. Moistening strips can be employed that are designed to reduce the vibration of these soft tissues. Alternatively, mouth guards can prevent the tongue from falling to the back of the mouth. However, such remedies are not guaranteed, and if your sleeping and snoring is more serious, do consult your GP.

Don't Mess With Your Sleep Cycle

A good night's rest is usually an indicator that the body has undergone four specific stages of sleep, which together, form one sleep cycle. At stage one, a person will feel drowsy. Stage two is where someone drops off to sleep. The third stage constitutes deep, slow wave sleep. The final fourth stage is REM sleep, signified by Rapid Eye Movement, an indication that we are dreaming. Sleeping soundly requires that we go through four to six cycles in one night, and anything less will be detrimental to our performance when awake. The best way to ensure you have the right mixture of sleep stages is to avoid caffeine and alcohol before sleeping, as they can distort the natural sleep pattern, and ensure that you sleep for between seven and nine hours every night.

Typical hypnogram – a measure of how the EEG changes during a typical night of sleep. This is an adult of 39 years of age.

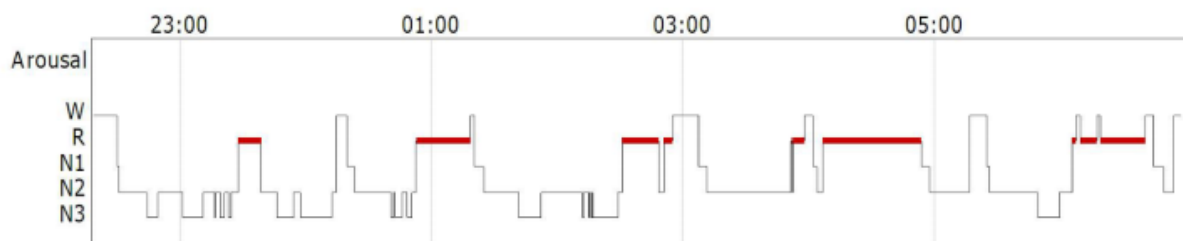
W = wake

R = REM or dream sleep

N1 = the lightest stage of sleep

N2 = light non-dream sleep

N3 = deep slow wave sleep



Exercise

Did you know that exercise can help you sleep sounder and longer and feel more awake during the day? It's true. But the key is found in the type of exercise you choose and the time you participate in it during the day.

Exercising vigorously right before bed or within about three hours of your bedtime can actually make it harder to fall asleep. This surprises many people; it's often thought that a good workout before bed helps you feel more tired. In fact, vigorous exercise right before bed stimulates your heart, brain and muscles - the opposite of what you want at bedtime. It also raises your body temperature right before bed, which is not what you want.

Morning exercise can relieve stress and improve mood. These effects can indirectly improve sleep. To get a more direct sleep-promoting benefit from morning exercise, however, you can couple it with exposure to outdoor light. Being exposed to natural light in the morning, whether you're exercising or not, can improve your sleep at night by reinforcing your body's sleep-wake cycle.

When it comes to having a direct effect on getting a good night's sleep, it's vigorous exercise in the late afternoon or early evening that appears most beneficial. That's because it raises your body temperature above normal a few hours before bed, allowing it to start falling just as you're getting ready for bed. This decrease in body temperature appears to be a trigger that helps ease you into sleep.

Jet Lag

Jet lag affects frequent flyers and holiday makers alike. In addition, the older we get, our body clock does not adjust to different time zones as quickly. Jet lag does tend to interrupt therapy for Insomnia, so if you are travelling over more than two time zones, we recommend you wait and start our treatment at a time when you have 6-7 weeks in the country. If this is not possible, you can pause the course by stopping entering sleep diaries and can restart when you're back in the country for an extended period. Large time zone differences (over 2 hours) would be a struggle for our system and for you, as we ask you to keep to quite specific timings, at least for the early part of therapy.

Relaxation

One simple and effective method to wind down is to repeatedly tense and relax your muscles, shortly before going to bed. Starting with the feet, tense all the muscles in one foot for a few seconds, and then release. Repeat this tensing, holding and relaxing for the rest of the body. The whole exercise should last for about 15 minutes, and should leave you feeling a lot more relaxed, and ready to sleep.

