

9 Factors That Can Enhance or Hinder Your Sleep

Lack of sleep is a serious problem in the United States. Recent surveys indicate almost half of all Americans do not get enough shut-eye. Sleep deprivation can lead to serious health problems. Lack of sleep often causes us to overeat because when we're tired the hunger hormone kicks into high gear.

Some people get less sleep than they need by choice. These are the people who make the conscious decision to stay up late working (or playing) then get up early. Those people would be wise to re-think their choice to burn the candle at both ends and exercise self-discipline by getting the proper amount of sleep.

In the short-term as well as in the long-term, they will reap the health benefits. You know you are not getting enough sleep if you do not feel refreshed in the morning. Other clues are irritability, grogginess, difficulty concentrating or staying awake during meetings or classes, and trying to catch-up on sleep on weekends.

Aside from people who choose to get less sleep than their body requires, there are millions of people who would like to get a full eight hours of sleep and try to do so but can't. This is called insomnia. There are two types of insomniacs: people who can't fall asleep to begin with, and people who fall asleep just fine but who wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep.

Since so many people have difficulty sleeping, sleeping pills are some of the most widely prescribed medications in America and some of the best-selling over-the-counter medications. Sadly, however, sleeping pills usually do more harm than good.

For many, the first step tends to be sleeping pills when, in reality, it should be one of the last. According to sleep experts, this medication is addictive, can have serious side effects, and can cause drowsiness during the day.

Instead of taking a sleeping pill, it's better to figure out what's causing the sleep trouble and fix that. Many sleep disorders are brought on by underlying physical problems, like obesity or emotional issues like depression.

Many doctors say that by addressing those root causes and changing some lifestyle choices, you can get the sleep you want and need without drugs.

1. Diet. One reason for sleeplessness can be eating or drinking the wrong things. Too much caffeine can be a culprit so cut out coffee, tea, soda and even chocolate, eight hours before bedtime or better yet, altogether. Don't eat within two hours of bedtime and avoid big meals and alcohol, which can knock you out but later wake you up. Nix the spicy or fatty foods. They cause heartburn, which interferes with sleep.

2. Environment. In order to really get a great night's sleep, turn your bedroom into a true sleep chamber. That means eliminating anything your brain associates with wakefulness. So when you're in bed, don't do things like watch TV, pay the bills or have tense conversations.

In fact, if you worry in bed, think about something calm or get out of bed and go to another room. Then once you are in that other room, get a pen and literally write down your problems. This subconsciously transfers them from your mind to the paper, relieving stress so you can go back to bed.

Prayer before bed and when you have difficulty sleeping is very effective. As the Bible says, "cast your cares upon Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7).

3. Exercise. Regular exercise, particularly in the afternoon,

can have you sleeping like a baby. Many people find they no longer need sleep aids or anti-depressants after starting and sticking to a regular exercise program that involves at least 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise daily as well as weight training. Finish your work-out at least two or three hours before bedtime.

4. Bathing. Taking a warm shower or bath before bed is a great way to calm and soothe. Using fragrant bath products can also help.

5. Temperature. Make sure your bedroom is cool. The temperature should not exceed 68 degrees. Do not use a lot of heavy blankets. A cool temperature aids a good night's sleep. Many people don't realize they wake up because they are too hot. There are even cooling pillows available at home stores.

6. Sight and sound. Make sure your bedroom is dark. Avoid nightlights, light from other rooms or the hallway and electronics. Make sure no light is coming in from outside the window. You may want to invest in some thick curtains or blinds. Use a sleep mask or earplugs if necessary.

White noise machines are very helpful to block out sounds that might wake you, such as traffic, snoring, or the air conditioner or heater turning on and off.

7. Consistency. Make sure you go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on the weekends. Our bodies do better when we stick with the same schedule.

8. Smoking. Cigarettes contain nicotine, which is a stimulant, meaning it keeps us awake just like coffee.

9. Sleep apnea. If these tips don't work, see your doctor about getting tested for sleep apnea. This is a condition where a person's oxygen supply is cut off many times during the night, preventing a restful night's sleep. Sleep apnea is caused by the airway closing during sleep.

A good way to recognize sleep apnea is the person gasps and chokes during the night. People with sleep apnea are usually prescribed a C-PAP machine to use at night, that keeps the airway open. People with sleep apnea often find that when they use the C-PAP machine they experience restful sleep and have increased energy and lose weight.

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