How to Get the Healthy Sleep You Need
What Is “Healthy Sleep”? 

That answer is different for each person. Many people need 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night to feel well rested. If you feel alert and you function well during the day, you probably get enough sleep.

Of course, most people have times when it’s hard to fall asleep or stay asleep. It’s common:
• To wake up briefly once or twice during the night and fall back to sleep.
• To need less sleep as a person ages.
• To sleep poorly for 2 or 3 nights in a row, especially during stressful times.

It’s also common that when you begin to worry about your sleep pattern, you can become stressed about it. And that stress can contribute to your inability to fall asleep and stay asleep.

What are your sleep habits?

What do you typically do in the two hours before you go to bed each night?

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Check the activities that you think may affect your sleep.

Which of those activities can you change? If you want to improve the quality of your sleep, use the space below to list some small changes you could make right away to improve your sleep. You’ll get more ideas in this material.

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Why read this material?

If you’re having a hard time falling asleep or staying asleep, this material could help you. It explains how good sleep and poor sleep affect you, and how you can develop healthy sleep habits. It also offers ideas to help you avoid or break poor sleep habits. If you’d like to learn about the body’s circadian rhythm, which works to regulate your sleep/wake patterns, see the Appendix.
How Does Sleep Affect You?

If you often have a hard time sleeping, you probably know that it can affect your daily activities. But do you also know about its effects on your general health?

**On a daily basis, poor sleep can affect your:**

- Energy level.
- Emotions.
- Memory and learning.
- Ability to think clearly and make decisions.
- Ability to focus.
- Reaction time.
- Desire to be social.

**Over time, frequent or consistently poor sleep can:**

- Negatively affect your immune system, putting you at greater risk for illness.
- Lead to long-term tiredness (chronic fatigue).
- Increase your risk for mood problems, such as depression and anxiety.
- Make it harder to think, focus, remember, and learn.
- Negatively affect your job or school performance.
- Negatively affect your personal relationships.
- Shorten your lifespan.

**Good sleep helps you. It:**

- Improves your mental, emotional and physical well-being.
- Increases your ability to manage life’s daily stressors.
- Strengthens your immune system. This system helps you fight viruses and bacteria that could make you sick.
- Regulates your hormones, such as cortisol, testosterone, estrogen, and growth hormones.
- Repairs your cells and building new cells.
Common factors that affect sleep

If any of the following issues affect you on a regular basis, they could easily lead to a pattern of poor sleep.

- General health concerns, such as hormone changes, allergies and pain.
- Lifestyle habits, such as a poor diet, smoking and intake of alcohol or caffeine.
- Psychological conditions, including stress and mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety.
- Trauma or abuse (past or current).
- Medication side effects. (See “Medications and other substances can affect sleep.”)
- Sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, narcolepsy, etc.
- Poor sleep habits.
- Stress.

Medications and other substances can affect sleep

Many prescription and over-the-counter medications can cause sleep problems, such as:

- Certain high blood pressure medications.
- Medications that have stimulant ingredients. Examples include medications used for dieting and for treating attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Medications that have caffeine.
- Bronchodilators, such as those used to treat asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Steroid medications, such as Prednisone™.

Other substances that can cause sleep problems are:

- Drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, and heroin.
- Alcohol.

If you suspect that a medication, other substance, or alcohol or drug use may be causing your sleep problem, talk to your health care provider. **Never stop taking a medication without first talking to your health care provider.** Also talk to your health care provider before you take over-the-counter medication to help you sleep.
Tips to Help You Sleep Better

It is possible for a few days of poor sleep activities to turn into poor sleep habits. If those habits aren’t identified and changed, it could lead to long periods of poor sleep and many other negative effects.

**Simple ways to improve your sleep**

Improving the quality of your sleep is like learning a new habit. It takes practice — consistent, regular practice. To improve your sleep, make a commitment now to try these ideas for at least four weeks. It could be three to four weeks before you start to notice an improvement in your sleep.

Don’t be surprised if you notice changes in your sleep, including poor sleep, before you start to see an improvement. If you still have difficulty sleeping after four weeks of consistently using these tips, contact your health care provider.

Check the boxes of the ideas you are willing to try.

**Make your bedroom a pleasant place to sleep in**

- Use the bedroom for sleep and sex. Do not use it for worrying, studying, discussing problems, or paying bills.
- Make your bed and bedroom as relaxing as possible. Have clean linens on the bed. Use a pillow and a mattress that allow you to wake feeling good.
- Keep the temperature comfortable. Many people prefer that the temperature of the room is slightly cool as they sleep. To adjust your personal comfort in bed, try to add or remove blankets or clothing first. Change the thermostat in the house as a last resort.
- Manage the amount of light in your bedroom while you sleep. Having a space as dark as possible is best. Turn the clock away from your face so you can’t check it at night. Consider getting black-out curtains.
- Keep your bedroom as quiet as possible. Use a fan or other device to make “white” noise that will drown out any bothersome noises. Some examples of bothersome noises are snoring, traffic, dogs and cats (in the house or outdoors), the furnace or air conditioner, and clocks that chime while you sleep.
- Do not let pets sleep in your bedroom. Even a slight noise could wake you when you are sleeping lightly. Note: If you have to train your pet to sleep somewhere else, it may take a week or so for the pet to stop trying to return to your bedroom.
- If you use a fan, point it away from you.
- Use scents in the room, such as lavender, to help you relax. This is called aromatherapy.
Develop healthy habits for a restful night’s sleep

☐ Go to bed and get up at the same time every day of the week, even when it’s “a day off” from your usual routine. People who follow a sleep pattern tend to sleep better.

☐ Have a consistent daytime schedule as often as possible.
  – Try to eat your meals (especially dinner) at the same time each day.
  – Avoid heavy or spicy meals two to three hours before going to bed.
  – Try to exercise 20 to 30 minutes most days. Because exercise increases the body temperature and pumps the hormone adrenaline through the body, some people find it difficult to fall asleep right after they exercise. If this is true for you, exercise earlier in the day.
  – Schedule some time for a stress-reducing activity during the day, such as yoga, meditation or prayer.
  – If you like to take a hot bath in the evening, do it two to three hours before bedtime. This will give your body time to cool off, so you can fall asleep easier.

☐ If you get sleepy during the day, change your environment or increase your activity level.

☐ Try to avoid taking a nap. If you must nap, do it at least six to eight hours before bedtime. Limit the nap to 30 minutes at most. This will help you avoid reaching a deep-sleep stage. It will also help you avoid disrupting your night sleep cycle.

☐ If you often wake up during the night to use the bathroom, avoid drinking fluids for three hours before you go to bed.

☐ Don’t drink beverages with caffeine (coffee, tea, and soda) after 12 p.m. (or 10 hours before your bedtime). Limit your caffeinated beverages to three per day.

Which of these ideas will you try in the next few days?

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Which of these ideas will you try in the next few days?
Create a bedtime routine

☐ Spend time before bedtime doing quiet, relaxing activities.

☐ Develop a bedtime ritual. Do things that give you a sense of security and comfort. For example, check the lights and thermostat and lock the doors. Perform personal grooming activities.

☐ Wear comfortable pajamas or nightgowns. They shouldn’t be too loose or too tight.

☐ Stop using electronics, such as the TV, computer and smart phone, about an hour before you plan to go to bed.

☐ Keep a notepad and pen near the bed so you can write down any last-minute thoughts you have as you prepare to go to sleep. Many people find that when they write those ideas down, they can sleep better.

☐ Consider having a gratitude journal. Before you turn off the lights to go to sleep, write down one or two things that you are grateful for. Many people believe that positive thoughts help a person rest better.

☐ Listen to your body. Go to bed when you feel sleepy, such as when your eyes and head start to feel heavy. Note: It may take a few days before your sleep pattern changes. This step will happen earlier in the evening after your sleep pattern is better.

Which of these ideas will you try in the next few days?

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When you are in bed

☐ As you try to fall asleep, think about images that are pleasant and relaxing.

☐ Don’t check the clock.

☐ Spend less than eight hours in bed. Sleeping longer than that may make it harder for you to fall asleep the next night.

Which of these ideas will you try in the next few days?

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What to do if you are having a hard time falling asleep

☐ If you wake up and you’re comfortable in bed, stay in bed. To help you fall asleep again, think about relaxing images or do progressive muscle relaxation.

☐ If you are awake for 15 minutes, then get out of bed and go to another quiet, relaxing room in your home. Listen to music, read or do another quiet (even boring) activity. Don’t watch TV or use the computer. Go back to bed only when you start to feel sleepy again.

Tips for shift workers

Working different shifts makes it hard to maintain a regular sleep cycle. If your work schedule changes, the following tips may help you get a good night’s sleep:

☐ Limit your caffeine intake.

☐ If you smoke, talk to your health care provider about quitting.

☐ Create a transition time between work and sleep. Use this time to do quiet, relaxing activities that make you feel sleepy and help prepare you for bed.

☐ Make the bedroom dark and soundproof. Hide the clock.

☐ Tell friends, family and neighbors that you sleep during the day and do not want to be disturbed. Turn off your computer, phone(s) and anything else that could interrupt your sleep.

☐ Work with your family or roommates so they can change their routines, if needed.

Which of these ideas will you try in the next few days?

If you have a partner who snores

☐ Talk to your partner about his or her snoring.

☐ Use ear plugs or add “white noise” in the background (such as a fan).

☐ Consider sleeping in another room. Go to bed together as usual, but when your partner starts to snore, find some other place to sleep.

Good partnerships are made during the day when both partners feel well rested. Staying in bed with a snoring partner will not improve your relationship.

If your partner’s snoring is interrupted by pauses in his or her breathing, or by gasps or snorts, suggest that your partner see a health care provider. He or she may want to test your partner for sleep apnea.
When to Contact Your Health Care Provider

Contact your health care provider if you notice any of the following:

- It has been a month since you have been able to sleep soundly or fall asleep when you want to.
- Your poor sleep affects how you function during the day.
- You snore or have irregular breathing.
- You think your sleep problems may be related to depression or anxiety.
- You generally feel anxiety related to your poor sleep.
- You wonder whether your use of certain medications, drugs or other substances is affecting your sleep.
- You often feel sleepy when you need to be alert, such as when you are driving.
- You need pills to get to sleep.
- You want to learn about taking melatonin, a natural hormone supplement that helps regulate the body’s sleep cycle.

If you have questions after reading this information, contact your health care provider.
Appendix: The Stages of Sleep

The circadian rhythm

Sleep, body temperature and alertness are all part of the body’s daily rhythm, or “cycle.” This rhythm is managed, or regulated, by your brain. For all life on earth, this cycle usually lasts about 24 hours. It is called a “circadian cycle.” Because our bodies tend to operate on this 24-hour cycle, what we do during the day affects how well we sleep at night.

How your sleep cycle works

During the night, you typically go through four to six stages of sleep. Together these are called a “sleep cycle.” Each cycle takes about 60 to 90 minutes to complete.

- The first three stages of a sleep cycle are non-rapid eye movement (NREM).
- The last sleep-cycle stage is rapid eye movement (REM).

Throughout the night, you continually move from one sleep stage to another.

1. You are in light sleep stage when you are falling asleep. This is also called stage N1.
2. The intermediate sleep stage is called N2. This is where most people spend the longest time during a typical sleep cycle.
3. The deep sleep stage is called N3.
4. The dreaming sleep stage is called REM sleep. This is when you have the most brain activity. It’s also when you dream, and your body functions speed up — although you don’t usually move during this stage.

During the early sleep cycles each night, the “N sleep stages” are very long. The REM stages are very short. During later sleep cycles, the N stages are shorter, and the REM periods are longer.
BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal Mayo Clinic patient of more than 40 years and a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family’s activities in oil, gas and ranching. Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.

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