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How to Sleep Better

'Sleep Hygiene' Solutions for Better Sleep

By [Michael J. Breus, PhD](#)

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FROM THE WEBMD ARCHIVES

From having occasional difficulty sleeping to [insomnia](#), there is a lot you can do to get a better night's [sleep](#), feel refreshed when you awake, and remain alert throughout the day. It's called "[sleep](#) hygiene" and refers to those practices, habits, and environmental factors that are critically important for sound [sleep](#). And most of it is under your control.

There are four general areas important to sleep hygiene:

- Our circadian rhythm, or 24-hour cycle
- Aging

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- Psychological stressors -- those factors can cause difficulty falling asleep and disturb the quality of your sleep
- Common social or recreational drugs like nicotine, [caffeine](#), and alcohol

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Circadian Rhythm

We all have a day-night cycle of about 24 hours called the circadian rhythm. It greatly influences when we sleep and the quantity and the quality of our sleep. The more stable and consistent our circadian rhythm is, the better our sleep. This cycle may be altered by the timing of various factors, including naps, [bedtime](#), [exercise](#), and especially exposure to light (from traveling across time zones to staring at that laptop in bed at night).

Aging

Aging also plays a role in sleep and sleep hygiene. After the age of 40 our sleep patterns change, and we have many more nocturnal awakenings than in our younger years. These awakenings not only directly affect the quality of our sleep, but they also interact with any other condition that may cause arousals or awakenings, like the withdrawal syndrome that occurs after drinking alcohol close to [bedtime](#) . The more awakenings we have at night, the more



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likely we will awaken feeling unrefreshed and unrestored.

Psychological Stressors

Psychological stressors like deadlines, exams, marital conflict, and job crises may prevent us from falling asleep or wake us from sleep throughout the night. It takes time to "turn off" all the noise from the day. No way around it. If you work right up to the time you turn out the lights, or are reviewing all the day's events and planning tomorrow (sound familiar?), you simply cannot just "flip a switch" and drop off to a blissful night's sleep.

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