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SLEEP

8 secrets to a good night's sleep

Tired of feeling tired? Here are some simple tips to help you get to sleep.

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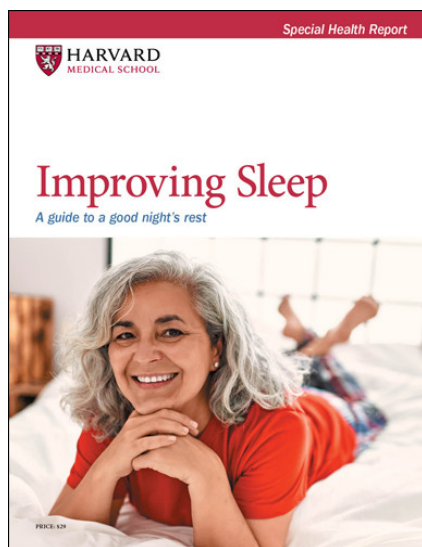
After a night spent tossing and turning, you wake up feeling like a couple of the Seven Dwarves: sleepy... and grumpy. Restless nights and weary mornings can become more frequent as we get older and our sleep patterns change.

Later in life there tends to be a decrease in the number of hours slept. There are also some changes in the way the body regulates circadian rhythms. This internal clock helps your body respond to changes in light and dark. When it undergoes a shift with age, it can be harder to fall asleep and stay asleep through the night.

We all have trouble sleeping from time to time, but when insomnia persists day after day, it can become a real problem. Beyond making us tired and moody, a lack of sleep can have serious effects on our health, increasing our propensity for obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes.

If you've been having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, you may have turned to sleep medications in search of more restful slumber. However, these drugs can have side effects, including appetite changes, dizziness, drowsiness, abdominal discomfort, dry mouth, headaches, and strange dreams.

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Improving Sleep: A guide to a good night's rest

When you wake up in the morning, are you refreshed and ready to go, or groggy and grumpy? For many people, the second scenario is all too common. Improving Sleep: A guide to a good night's rest describes the latest in sleep research, including information about the numerous health conditions and medications that can interfere with normal sleep, as well as prescription and over-the-counter medications used to treat sleep disorders. Most importantly, you'll learn what you can do to get the sleep you need for optimal health, safety, and well-being.

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You don't need to avoid sleep aids if you absolutely need them, but before you turn to pills, try these eight tips to help you get a better night's sleep.

1. Exercise

Going for a brisk daily walk won't just trim you down, it will also keep you up less often at night. Exercise boosts the effect of natural sleep hormones such as melatonin. Just watch the timing of your workouts. Exercising too close to bedtime can be stimulating. Morning workouts that expose you to bright daylight will help the natural circadian rhythm.

2. Reserve bed for sleep and sex

Don't use your bed as an office for answering phone calls, texting, and responding to emails. Also, avoid watching late-night TV there. The bed needs to be a stimulus for sleeping, not for wakefulness. Reserve your bed for sleep and sex.

3. Keep it comfortable

Television and your smartphone aren't the only possible distractions in your bedroom. Ambience can affect your sleep quality too. Make sure your bedroom is as comfortable as possible. Ideally you want a quiet, dark, cool environment. All of these things promote sleep onset.

4. Start a sleep ritual

When you were a child and your mother read you a story and tucked you into bed every night, this comforting ritual helped lull you to sleep. Even in adulthood, a set of bedtime rituals can have a similar effect. Rituals help signal the body and mind that it's coming to

be time for sleep. Drink a glass of warm milk. Take a bath. Or listen to calming music to unwind before bed.

5. Eat — but not too much

A grumbling stomach can be distracting enough to keep you awake, but so can an overly full belly. Avoid eating a big meal within two to three hours of bedtime. If you're hungry right before bed, eat a small, healthy snack (such as an apple with a slice of cheese or a few whole-wheat crackers) to satisfy you until breakfast.

6. Avoid alcohol and caffeine

If you do have a snack before bed, wine and chocolate shouldn't be part of it. Chocolate contains caffeine, which is a stimulant. Surprisingly, alcohol has a similar effect. It makes you a little sleepy, but it's actually a stimulant and it disrupts sleep during the night. Also, stay away from anything acidic (such as citrus fruits and juices) or spicy, which can give you heartburn.

7. De-stress

The bills are piling up and your to-do list is a mile long. Daytime worries can bubble to the surface at night. Stress is a stimulus. It activates the fight-or-flight hormones that work against sleep. Give yourself time to wind down before bed. Learning some form of the relaxation response can promote good sleep and can also reduce daytime anxiety. To relax, try deep breathing exercises. Inhale slowly and deeply, and then exhale.

8. Get checked

An urge to move your legs, **snoring**, and a burning pain in your stomach, chest, or throat are symptoms of three common sleep disrupters — restless legs syndrome, sleep apnea, and gastroesophageal reflux disease or GERD. If these symptoms are keeping you up at night or making you sleepy during the day, see your doctor for an evaluation.

Taking sleep medicines safely

If you've tried lifestyle changes and they aren't working, your doctor may prescribe hypnotic sleep medications. These drugs can help you fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer, but they also can have side effects. Here are some tips for ensuring that you're taking these medicines as safely as possible:

- **Tell your doctor about all other medicines you're taking.** Some drugs can interact with sleep medications.
- **Take only the lowest possible effective dose,** for the shortest possible period of time.
- **Carefully follow your doctor's instructions.** Make sure you take the right dose at the right time of day (which is typically just before bed).
- **Call your doctor right away if you experience any side effects,** such as excess sleepiness during the day or dizziness.
- **While you're taking the sleep medicine, also practice the good sleep habits** outlined in this article.
- **Avoid drinking alcohol and driving** while taking sleep aids.
- **Sleep medications may make you walk unsteadily** if you get out of bed in a drowsy state. If you routinely have to get out of bed during the night to urinate, be sure the path to your bathroom is clear of obstacles or loose rugs so you don't fall.

Image: Goodboy Picture Company/Getty Images

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