

Difficulty sleeping is a very common problem, particularly for students. In the 2013 campus health survey carried out at the University of Alberta (American College Health Association), only 10% of students reported that they had had no problems with sleepiness during daytime activities within the past week; for 28% of students, sleep difficulties had been traumatic or very difficult to handle within the last year. Sleep problems include difficulties falling asleep, frequent awakenings during the night, and early morning awakening. On average, adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep to function at an optimum, but there are significant individual differences in the amount of sleep needed. Good sleep is essential to restore our body and our mind.

### coping strategies

Remember that it may take several weeks of consistent practice, with the following hints, to experience a significant improvement in your sleep.

#### 1 control your sleep environment

Creating a healthy sleep environment should include each of the following:

- a. Eliminate noise (e.g., ear plugs, white noise generator). A fan, humidifier, or air conditioner can often serve as a white noise generator.
- b. Reduce room light (e.g., window blinds, eye shades).
- c. Regulate room temperature (e.g., lower the thermostat). If you are too warm, you will wake up more often, move more during your sleep, and your deep sleep will be disrupted.
- d. Have a good supportive mattress. If you wake up stiff or sore it could be a sign that your mattress and box-spring are not giving adequate support.
- e. Use a humidifier if the air in your room is very dry since warm, moist air often helps us breathe easier.

#### 2 establish a bedtime ritual

Make a ritual out of going to bed by trying to do the same activities in the same order each and every night before you go to bed. Ensure that the routine doesn't include stimulating activities within an hour before bed. To relax, listen to calm music, have a hot bath, read some "light" material, or listen to relaxation tapes.

#### 3 set your internal time clock

Become aware of your own internal time clock and go to bed when you feel tired. However, as much as possible, get up at the same time each and every day of your life (even on weekends). Once your internal clock is set, you should feel sleepy at approximately the same time each night and can then establish a regular bedtime. Getting lots of morning sunlight will also help regulate your sleep-wake cycle.

#### 4 don't stay in bed

If you haven't fallen asleep within 20–30 minutes, don't stay in bed. Instead, get up and do something boring (e.g., read, have a light snack, watch TV, listen to relaxing music).

#### 5 reserve your bed for sleep and sex

To form an appropriate association with your sleep environment, sleep researchers recommend you avoid activities other than sleep or sex in your bed. Studying, watching TV, reading, email, texting, eating, or other activities that require mental activity should be avoided when in bed. Especially avoid late night news programming, violent movies, and arguments with your partner, family or friends.

## 6 be careful about napping

Napping during the day will usually disrupt your internal time clock and should be avoided. If you must nap, do so for no longer than 30 minutes and ideally do it at the same time every day. Taking a nap the day after a bad night's sleep will likely only perpetuate your sleep problems.

## 7 avoid stimulants

Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine, particularly for several hours before going to bed. Remember caffeine is found in many foods or drinks besides coffee or tea, such as soft drinks, chocolate, and certain medications (e.g., Anacin, Midol, Excedrin). If you smoke, be aware that research shows that smokers generally take more time to fall asleep, awaken more frequently, and tend to experience disrupted, fragmented sleep more often than non-smokers.

## 8 avoid alcohol and marijuana

Even though alcohol or marijuana may make you more relaxed and therefore you may find it easier to fall asleep, they both disrupt deep sleep and cause more early morning awakening, leaving you less re-energized by your sleep overall.

## 9 reduce your life stress

Stress is considered the number one cause of sleep problems in North America. Difficulties managing life stress will usually affect one's sleep pattern. Learning some effective stress management skills would be essential to overcome this source of sleep disturbance.

## 10 set up a worry time

If you tend to worry a lot when you go to bed and therefore can't fall asleep, set up a "worry time" during the day to think about and problem-solve those issues that are keeping you awake. Or, if you go to bed and start worrying, get up, go to a "worry chair", and let yourself worry for 10 to 20 minutes before returning to bed.

## 11 use relaxation techniques

If you are having difficulties falling asleep, use some relaxation skills (e.g., deep breathing, autogenic training, deep muscle relaxation, progressive muscle relaxation or imagery training) to put yourself into Stage 1 of the sleep cycle, and enhance your chances of a deep sleep. If you are unfamiliar with these techniques, a counsellor or psychologist can teach you these skills.

## 12 focus on relaxing images

Focusing on relaxing images tends to stimulate activity in the right hemisphere of our brain, which also coordinates the relaxation response in our body. These images could involve almost anything you find personally relaxing: your favorite place, a trip you took, a deserted island, or a place you have always dreamed of travelling to.

## 13 exercise regularly

Exercise regularly so your body feels tired when you go to bed. You are more likely to experience deep sleep if you exercise. However, do not do strenuous exercises within 3 hours of bedtime. Exercise increases your core body temperature and sleepiness will only set in when your body temperature drops. The only exercise just before bedtime that can help induce sleep is gentle stretching for a few minutes.

Strenuous exercise in the late afternoon promotes the most restful sleep at night. Exercise is particularly important the day after a bad night's sleep. Being less active the next day only magnifies your sleep problems.

## 14 take a warm bath

Enjoying a hot bath before bedtime will help you relax both mentally and physically. As your body cools after the bath, you are more likely to fall asleep.

## 15 watch what you eat

Eating too much before bedtime can disrupt your sleep because your body is actively involved in the process of digestion. However, going to bed hungry may also disrupt your sleep, so try having a light snack.

There are a number of foods that can disrupt sleep (e.g., tyrosine-rich foods) and others that can induce sleep (e.g., tryptophan-rich foods). It can be helpful to do your own research and experiment with what works for you.

## 16 avoid watching your clock

Attending to your clock during the night will often increase your sense of worry and ultimately disrupt your sleep. Turn your clock around or cover it up if you can't avoid looking at it during the night.

## 17 restrict your liquid intake before bed

If you drink too much before bed, you may very well disrupt your sleep because you need to go to the washroom. Trips to the washroom will likely disrupt the quality of sleep since we don't get the deep restorative phases of sleep if it is interrupted rather than continuous. Diuretics (i.e., water pills) should be taken in the morning rather than at night for the same reasons.

## 18 assess the effect of your prescription medications

Some medications such as birth control pills, blood pressure medications, and anti-depressants can affect the sleep cycle. If they do, it may be necessary to switch to other medications that have the same beneficial effects but do not influence your sleep.

## 19 address any underlying medical issues

There are several medical problems that could interfere with your sleep that are worth checking out and possibly treating. These include heartburn, asthma, arthritis, angina, and chronic pain.

## 20 use sleeping pills very cautiously

The occasional use of sleeping pills may help, but using them more than a couple of nights at a time will likely throw off your normal sleep cycle and cause problems in the long run. Sleeping pills lose their effectiveness with extended use, can be addictive, can cause rebound insomnia when you stop using them, and may interfere with the most restorative stages of sleep.

## 21 don't panic

If you can't sleep, don't panic. The more you panic the less chance you will sleep. Sleep is a natural process you don't want to force. Just let it happen. Remember, we can still function without much sleep even though it doesn't feel very good. Perhaps you don't need as much sleep as you think, or look at it as more time to live.

## References

American College Health Association (2013). National College Health Assessment II.

\* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: [uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth](https://uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth)