

TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS, by Rubin R. Naiman, Ph.D.

- 1. Simulate Dusk:** Create a simulated "dusk" experience beginning at least an hour before bedtime. Be sure to dim the lights. In nature, night does not "fall," it gradually descends. It is natural to slow down as it gets dark. Keep enough light on to do what you need, but no more. You can even dim the brightness of your TV screen. Also, let yourself wind down. Consider bathing, changing into night clothes, and shifting your attention to a quiet, soothing activity. Read, write in a journal, meditate. Don't work.
- 2. Schedule Sleep:** Establish a very regular bed and rising time and adhere to this even through weekend and holidays. If you must change one, try not to change your rising time. The brain seems to use this time as a "marker" for regulating sleep and waking cycles. Schedule a sufficient sleep length to keep you energized through the day. Napping is not advisable when one is struggling with insomnia. When sleeping is normal, naps may be quite helpful since most people do not get enough sleep at night.
- 3. Forget Time:** Never watch the clock at night. Checking the time repeatedly when one is unable to sleep is a very common practice, but not a helpful one. Watching the clock is a common daytime activity for most people and doing so at night can create a daytime frame of mind, contributing to wakefulness. Turn the clock away. Better yet, get it away from the bed. It is possible that electric clocks emit a level of electromagnetic energy which interferes with the brain's production of melatonin and, thereby, inhibits sleep.
- 4. Let Sleep Come:** There are no sleep *techniques*. Although it is common to say or think "I'm going to get to sleep," there is actually nothing one can do to get there. After a long day filled with *doing* this and that, the tendency is to try to *do* sleep. Sleep is grace, it is a gift from the unconscious. We cannot chase or grab hold of it, and if we try, we lose it. It is normal for the mind to engage in some activity as we are falling asleep. Just notice it. You don't need to stop this. There is nothing you need to do to sleep.
- 5. Keep the Bed "Sacred":** Try to minimize activity in and around the bed. A few minutes of reading or television is fine if it tends to get you drowsy. Don't get engrossed in a great novel or a movie, however. Sex will not interfere with sleep but their activities in bed can contribute to insomnia. Avoid working or eating in bed. Refrain from long phone conversations and lengthy discussions with a bed partner. Generally, try to keep the bed "sacred" for sleep.
- 6. Optimize Your Sleep Environment:** Make sure your bedroom is completely conducive to sleep. The sleep environment should be quiet, comfortably cool, dark, and feel safe. Background noise can be masked by a fan, a "white noise" machine, or earplugs. Avoid falling asleep with the TV or radio on. Blackout curtains or sleep masks can help keep it dark. Nighttime vigilance can be minimized by assuring that one feels completely safe in the-bedroom. Security systems and pets are often useful in this regard. Also, make sure your mattress is comfortable and in good condition.
- 7. Eat to Sleep:** Eating habits can have an important impact on your sleep. Eating late and heavy meals can interfere with sleep quality. In general, it is advisable to eat evening meals which are lighter (lower in fats and protein) and emphasize complex carbohydrates. A glass of warm milk and other whole protein recipes for sleep probably do not help. Complex carbohydrate snacks like a slice of wheat toast, dry popcorn, or a banana will promote sleep.
- 8. Exercise to Sleep:** Numerous research studies have shown an important correlation between exercise and sleep. Although there is individual variation, in general, it is advisable to get a minimum of forty-five minutes of aerobic exercise about three times per week. Exercise becomes an even more important factor in sleep as we age. Keep in mind that exercise tends to raise body temperature and that sleep requires a drop in body temperature. It is important to allow sufficient time, up to six or more hours for some people, for a drop in body temperature to occur or it can interfere with the onset of sleep. So don't exercise towards the latter part of the evening.
- 9. Moderate the Use of . . .** Alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco, are a part of everyday life. Although all of these substances may be enjoyable for some, they all can have a profound negative impact on sleep. Alcohol is a depressant and could help induce drowsiness. Unfortunately, as its effects wear off, usually during sleep. This commonly disrupts the quality of sleep and even causes awakenings. As a rule of thumb, drink less, drink with food, and drink earlier. Caffeine in the form of coffee, tea, or soft drinks has a relatively long-lasting effect on the body. Even small amounts can affect sleep in some people. It may be best to curtail its use by mid-afternoon. Tobacco, like caffeine, is a stimulant and can contribute to insomnia. Obviously, it is best not to smoke, but, if you must, avoid doing so at night.
- 10. Be Careful With Sleeping Pills:** Both prescription and over-the-counter sleeping pills are designed only for short-term use. Most sleeping pills do not actually produce a normal pattern of sleep and many are habit forming. Many millions of people have become dependent on sleeping pills. In fact, withdrawal from these medicines has become a major cause of insomnia today. Always discuss medication issues with your physician. Use the above suggestions to improve sleep and reduce dependence on sleeping pills.