

# SLEEP

---

## Facts

-Experts agree that most people require, on average, between seven and nine hours of sleep per night. Adolescents need even more, generally at least 8 ½ hours every night. And, our sleep needs don't decrease once we reach adulthood: we still need those 7-9 hours every night. Of course, individual needs vary, but these numbers represent a good 'rule of thumb.'

-You can't "bank" sleep. People who are chronically "underslept" incur a sleep debt which may never be fully repaid. This 'debt' may lead to health problems such as obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, and depression.

-Falling asleep 'when your head hits the pillow' is, in fact, a sign that you are likely sleep-deprived, rather than being an indicator of healthy sleep habits. A reasonable lag between bedtime and "sleeptime" is a good indicator that you are going to be able to sleep deeply, without feeling exhausted during the day. Ideally, a wind-down period in bed of between ten and 15 minutes is best, allowing you to glide, rather than tumble, into sleep.

-Watching television in bed, contrary to popular belief, does not induce sleep – in fact, you are falling asleep *in spite of* the television, and the bright lights of televisions and computers in fact disrupt brain activity for up to 90 minutes after they've been turned off. So, while you may be asleep, you are unlikely to reach the deeper levels of sleep that are required.

-Fatigue and insomnia are primary contributors to accidents, and the accident rate attributable to fatigue may approach that attributed to drunk driving. In fact, the Australian National Sleep Research Project reported that, for example, "seventeen hours of sustained wakefulness leads to a decrease in performance equivalent to a blood alcohol level of 0.05%."

-And, speaking of alcohol: it may help you to fall asleep, however, the quality of that sleep will be relatively poor and not nearly as rejuvenating as a nights' sleep without alcohol.

-It is common for people to approach wakefulness many times during the night, and even 'break through' into a consciously awake state. People who have had sleep problems, however, often latch onto this as 'proof' that they'll be awake all night – and this worry then, in turn, keeps them awake.

-True sleep disorders, including sleep apnea and narcolepsy, are relatively rare when compared to "lifestyle-driven" sleep problems, but should be considered and then assessed by a medical professional, especially if full implementation of the lifestyle changes suggested below do not yield positive results.

Putting all of these facts together, and assuming that you are reading this because you have concerns about your sleep habits or those of loved ones, let's take a look at what you can do about it. There are a number of strategies, all involving lifestyle modifications, which help people reset their sleep clocks. Review the list, compare the recommendations against your current habits, and make a plan. Bear in mind that these are lifestyle changes – and that you may not notice the impact on your sleep until after you've established the new habits for at least a week or two. The list may seem long – but taken together they boil down to nothing more than a different routine. Perhaps start with just a few of them, and build in more as you go along – but please remember that it will likely take changes in all of these areas to make a difference in your sleep.



## "Sleep Tips"

1. Establish a routine! Taking into consideration the recommendations above, set a bedtime for yourself as well as a target 'wake time.' Plan to go to bed within 30 minutes of that time every night; particularly if you have been experiencing significant sleep problems, be sure to keep to this routine on the weekends, as well.

2. Make your bedroom a sanctuary. Be sure your window shades and blinds are drawn, that your alarm clock faces away from you, and that the room is quiet. Keep the TV off!
3. Glide into bed – like a plane, not a helicopter! Begin your wind-down ‘ritual’ – washing up, brushing your teeth, etc. – 30 minutes before your target bedtime.
4. Consider reading before bed – preferably nothing too engaging – and if you watch TV or work on the computer, be sure to discontinue use at least an hour before going to bed.
5. Once you go to bed, give yourself enough time to fall asleep, remembering that a reasonable time – ten to 15 minutes - in bed before drifting off is optimal.
6. If you find yourself lying in bed awake for more than 20 minutes or so, get out of bed. From a purely behavioral perspective, lying in bed awake for hours is unhealthy – if nothing else, bed becomes a place to lie awake, rather than a place to sleep, and this may inadvertently perpetuate the problem. So, get out of bed, read quietly – preferably in another room – for a short while and then return to bed. If necessary, this can be repeated – and as difficult as this may seem to be, it will be no worse than lying in bed awake, and may well help reset your sleep behavior set.
7. If you awaken in the middle of the night, don’t worry – reassure yourself that this is normal and doesn’t mean, in itself, that you’ll be awake the rest of the night. Allow yourself to drift back to sleep. If you don’t fall back to sleep within 15 minutes or so, however, get out of bed and read for a short while before returning to bed – and sleep...
8. Moderation is a key factor. Smoking, alcohol use, and caffeine can all interfere with sleep. If you smoke, there are many programs that can help you cut back and, we hope, quit [smoking](#). Alcohol should be consumed in moderation; perhaps consider eliminating it altogether for a few weeks to gauge any impact on your sleep. Finally, if you drink coffee or other caffeinated beverages, consider having the equivalent of no more than two cups of coffee per day, and none later than eight hours prior to the time you’d like to go to sleep.
9. Exercise – regularly, but not too late in the day so that the physiologic activation that results interferes with getting to sleep.
10. Eat well – but not too much, and not too close to bedtime. Consider what you are eating, as well – often, digestive problems that follow the consumption of spicy foods can interfere with sleep.
11. Limit daytime naps. As luxurious as they may feel, they probably interfere with your ability to sleep when you really want to – at night. If you nap regularly, eliminating them from your routine may have a big impact on how well you sleep at night.
12. If you, like many people, have thoughts running through your head all night – planning the next days’ events, reviewing what you’ve done today, and so on – consider keeping a ‘worry journal.’ Write down the thoughts you’re having – literally, get them out of your head – so that you don’t struggle to remember everything even as you’re trying to get to sleep. And, yes, write – don’t be tempted to use your computer, tablet, or SmartPhone: you undoubtedly write more slowly than you type, and certainly more slowly than you think. The mere act of writing will help slow down the runaway thoughts, and may promote sleep.

There! Ready to go to sleep now? As mentioned, try these strategies for a reasonable ‘trial period.’ If you don’t notice any changes, consider meeting with a health care professional to further explore your specific situation. For more information, please consider going to the (U.S.) National Sleep Foundation [website](#). Good luck!