



A Good Night's Sleep

Tips and Support



AMERICAN
COLLEGE
HEALTH
ASSOCIATION

Why Is Sleep so Important?

You may feel that you're too busy studying, working, or having fun to slow down and get some rest. In addition, daily stressors may be making it harder for you to enjoy satisfying sleep.

Research shows that:

- Sleep is an essential—not optional—part of your day.
- While you sleep, your brain is hard at work forming the pathways necessary for learning and creating memories and new insights.
- Without enough sleep, you can't properly focus or pay attention.
- Lack of sleep can cause mood problems, including feelings of anxiety and depression.
- Lack of sleep makes you more susceptible to the common cold, flu, and other infections.

How Much Sleep Is Enough?

When healthy adults are given unlimited opportunity to sleep, they sleep on average between 8 and 8½ hours per night. The normal range is 7 to 9 hours. Most people report being irritable and cranky when they lack sleep, and chronic problems with sleep can lead to health issues.

Lack of sleep (less than 7 hours on a regular basis) can cause:

- thinking processes to slow down
- problems concentrating and paying attention
- problems remembering new information
- slower reaction times (this is important for drivers)
- faulty decision making and more risk taking

What Disrupts Sleep?

- Students report that stress is the most common reason they have trouble getting to sleep.
- Stimulants (like medications used to treat ADD and the caffeine in certain beverages, food, and pain relievers) can fool the body into thinking it isn't tired. It can take as long as 6-8 hours for the effects of caffeine to wear off.
- Nicotine is another stimulant that can keep you awake and lead to lighter-than-normal sleep.
- Alcohol is a sedative and can make it easier to initially fall asleep, but people who drink alcohol tend to wake up in the middle of the night when the effect wears off. Alcohol also reduces REM sleep, the active, dreaming part of sleep when brain areas important for learning and memory are stimulated.
- Certain over-the-counter drugs like decongestants may keep you awake.
- External factors like heat, noise, and bright light (like those emitted from computer, TV, and phone screens) can make it more difficult to fall asleep.

Sleep Disorders

Undiagnosed and untreated sleep disorders can also cause problematic sleepiness. These are the most common:

Insomnia: People with insomnia have difficulty falling asleep and/or maintaining sleep. Insomnia is often the result of a poor sleeping environment and tension and stress—the more anxious you get about insomnia, the worse it gets.

Sleep Apnea: People with sleep apnea stop breathing repeatedly during their sleep, so their sleep becomes fragmented and poor in quality. Heavy snoring or waking up gasping for air is a warning sign that you may have sleep apnea.

Narcolepsy: People with narcolepsy experience excessive daytime sleepiness because of their brain's inability to regulate sleep-wake cycles normally. They can involuntarily fall asleep and lose muscle tone for a few seconds or several minutes, while working, talking, eating, or—most dangerously—driving.

Create a Sleep-Friendly Environment

1. Design your sleep environment to be cool, quiet, dark, and comfortable.
2. Make sure your mattress and pillows are comfortable and supportive.
3. Remove any clutter from your bed and the surrounding area so you have a clear space to sleep. Using your bed as a study space may cause you to associate it with stress, which can interfere with your sleep. It is best to put work materials, computers, and televisions out of your immediate sleep area.
4. Don't lie in bed awake. If you find yourself still awake after staying in bed for more than 20 minutes, get up and do some relaxing activity (but don't use electronics!) until you feel sleepy. The anxiety of not being able to sleep can make it harder to fall asleep.
5. Turn your clock away from your bed. Constantly checking the time can add to stress, making it more difficult to sleep.
6. Develop a pre-bedtime routine. For example, taking a hot bath or shower, using 10 minutes for conscious breathing, reading quietly, or writing in a journal can ease your body's transition into sleep.
7. Shut down electronics 30 minutes before going to sleep. The blue light electronics emanate are arousing and can make you more alert.

Tips for Better Quality Sleep

- Try to maintain a regular sleep and wake time schedule, including on weekends when you may be tempted to sleep in. A regular waking time in the morning can help with your sleeping at night.
- A relaxing activity right before bedtime can help you separate your sleep time from things that can cause you excitement or anxiety. Examples are reading a book, listening to soft music, meditating, or taking a hot bath.
- Finish eating at least 2-3 hours before your regular bedtime, but don't go to bed feeling hungry. Eating too much, especially heavy meals and spicy foods, may make you less comfortable when settling down for bed or disturb your sleep.
- Be careful about taking long naps. A short 20–30 minute nap in the morning or early afternoon can refresh you if you are especially tired or sleep deprived, but napping in the late afternoon or evening or for longer than 20–30 minutes can interfere with your sleep at night.
- Exercising regularly makes it easier to fall asleep and contributes to sounder sleep; however, exercising right before going to bed may make it more difficult to fall asleep. Morning and late afternoon are the best times to exercise.
- Monitor your caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol consumption. Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants that can make you more alert and make it more difficult for you to fall and stay asleep. Alcohol can cause nighttime awakenings and less restful sleep.

When to Seek Professional Help

If you feel your constant lack of quality sleep is interfering with your daily activities or mood, seek support on campus or in your community. Your health care provider can help treat the problem or refer you to a specialist.

Recording your sleep and sleep-related activities in a sleep diary can also help you to better analyze your pattern of behavior when you talk with a health care provider.

For More Information

Your Guide to Healthy Sleep—a guide from the National Institutes of Health

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/healthy_sleep.pdf

National Sleep Foundation

www.sleepfoundation.org

American College Health Association

(410) 859-1500 | www.acha.org

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