

Tips for sleeping well

Ngā tohu whakamoe hauora

If you practise good sleep habits, you'll have the best chance of a good, refreshing sleep. A term that health professionals use to describe good sleep habits is sleep hygiene. Many sleeping problems are due to bad habits built up over a long time. You won't fix sleeping problems in one night but if you persevere, your sleep should improve. Different things may work for you, so find out what works and stick with it.



Above all, don't obsess about your sleep problems, as one poor night's sleep isn't a problem. Just return to your good sleep habits the next night.

If you're having trouble sleeping, or you just want to get a good night's sleep, read below for some ideas and recommendations to try.

Important

If despite practising good sleep habits, you still have trouble sleeping, see your general practice team, as something else may be disturbing your sleep.

Sleep needs

Most people need between seven and nine hours sleep each day, but this includes naps and time spent dozing in front of the TV. Don't build up unrealistic expectations of your sleep needs.

Go to bed and get up at the same time each day

- Your body has a natural clock, which will make you sleepy when you're ready for bed. Try not to ignore this.
- Going to bed too early may cause you to have a disturbed sleep.
- Getting up at the same time every day helps to keep your body clock synchronised with what's going on outside.
- If you can stick to a fairly regular waking and sleeping time, your body will get used to it.
- Avoid the temptation to try to make up for a poor night's sleep by sleeping in. But this doesn't mean you should be obsessive about it, an occasional night out or sleep-in isn't going to hurt.



Be physically active each day and try to spend time outdoors or in natural light

- Regular physical activity improves restful sleep. But don't be physically active just before going to bed. Physical activity straight before bed stimulates your body and may make it difficult to fall asleep. Do your physical activity earlier in the day, preferably before dinner time.
- Light is important for your body to produce melatonin, a hormone that helps make you feel sleepy. Sunlight early in the day is particularly helpful in synchronising your body clock.

Make your bedroom as restful as possible

- Keep the temperature cool, keep noises and outside light to a minimum, and leave distracting things such as beeping watches or clocks outside.
- Only use your bed for sleep and sex. Some people use their bed for knitting, studying, watching TV, making phone calls and so on. Try to avoid this and make sure your bed is associated with sleeping. Your brain makes connections between places (the bedroom) and events (sleeping) and you need to reinforce these.
- Don't share your bed with children or pets. Parents sleeping with young children sleep less and have more disturbed sleep.
- Don't look at the clock all the time. Clocks with bright numbers are a distraction and obsessing over time will just make it more difficult to sleep.

Take care about what you do just before bed

- Don't engage in stimulating activity just before bed. Playing a competitive game, watching an exciting programme or movie on TV or having an important family discussion stimulates your mind and thoughts will overflow to the bedroom. Worrying about or planning the next day's activity may be a natural thing to do but try to avoid it.
- Avoid using screens. Brightly lit screens reduce your body's ability to produce melatonin. While you might think you're using your screen to relax until you can sleep, your device or TV is actually keeping you awake.
- Don't use alcohol to help you sleep. Alcohol may help you get to sleep but it has some bad effects. It causes you to need more trips to the toilet, it causes you to wake up early, it causes fragmented sleep, and it worsens snoring and sleep apnoea.
- Don't drink caffeine-containing drinks in the evening. Coffee and tea are the obvious caffeine-containing drinks, but colas and many other soft drinks also have caffeine. Read the labels. A glass of warm milk is an old-fashioned recipe that may work well. If frequent trips to the toilet are a problem during the night, try not to drink too much before bedtime and make sure you go to bed with an empty bladder.
- Don't go to bed too hungry or too full. If you usually have a light supper, you should keep doing this but don't eat too much.
- Don't have a nap in the evening before you go to bed. If you usually have a daytime nap and it doesn't affect your night-time sleep, you can keep doing this. But try not to sleep in the evening as that is going to reduce your body's need to fall asleep.



Take medicines as directed

- Prescription medicines may cause you to be alert or sleepy. You should follow the instructions that come with them.
- Don't vary the time of day that you take your medicine.
- Don't rely on sleeping tablets to help you to sleep. Sleeping tablets have a role when something is temporarily causing you to have trouble getting to sleep but they're only a temporary fix. Some tablets may cause you to be a bit sleepy in the daytime and when you stop taking them, you may get a rebound and find it harder to fall asleep.

Quit smoking

Quitting smoking not only brings many health benefits, it also gets rid of the stimulant effects of nicotine that contribute to sleep loss.

Be comfortable and relaxed in bed

- If you're cold in bed, warm the room or wear warm pyjamas. Warm hands and feet are particularly important.
- If you have uncomfortable pillows, mattress or bedclothes, get them fixed. You'll spend the next eight hours in bed, and you don't want to be uncomfortable.
- A warm bath about an hour before bedtime causes your body's temperature to rise and then fall which may help you sleep.
- Some people find that techniques such as relaxation therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and mindfulness meditation can help them to sleep.

Don't stay in bed if you are awake

You can't force yourself to sleep. If you don't fall asleep in a reasonable time, perhaps 20 to 30 minutes, get up and do something boring, but do this in another room. Try to keep the lighting fairly dim. When you're tired, go back to bed. This helps your mind associate your bed with sleeping.

Bedtime restriction

For some people, following a bedtime restriction programme can be helpful. This involves reducing the amount of time you spend in bed, aiming for better quality sleep over a shorter time. You can then slowly increase your sleep time.

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