

Sleep Hygiene

What is it?

Sleep is a vital part of feeling well and happy. Sleep hygiene is a variety of practices that are necessary to have good night time sleep. Sleep disturbance is very common, especially during times of emotional overwhelm. Heightened emotions, anxiety, and persistent replaying of the day's events can interfere with your sleep. The most common cause of poor sleep is stress or a change in daily routine. Additional causes include exams, school stress, a change in schools, relationship conflicts, difficulties at home, and health worries.

Signs and Symptoms of poor sleep:

The main symptom of poor sleep or sleep loss is extreme daytime sleepiness. Other symptoms include:

- Yawning
- Moodiness
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Fluctuating moods
- Difficulty learning new concepts
- Forgetfulness
- Poor concentration or 'fuzzy' head
- Lack motivation
- Clumsiness
- Increased appetite and carbohydrate cravings

It takes time to get problematic sleep under control and rarely can this be done overnight. Developing sleep hygiene is essential to maintain good sleep. To help improve sleep hygiene it is useful to separate the fact from the fiction.

Sleep Myths: Fact or Fiction

We need eight hours of sleep:

There is no 'magic number' for sleep. Everyone is different - some of us can cope far better on less than others. Estimate what you need by how you feel the next day. Regularly getting less than six hours a night is not ideal as research shows that this may increase the 'fight or flight' response to stress, releasing hormones that speed up heart rate and raise blood pressure.

Once a poor sleeper, always a poor sleeper:

It is always possible to improve your sleep. Developing sleep hygiene can and does improve quality of sleep.



Daytime naps are bad for you:

Daytime naps are generally discouraged as they can affect night sleep. However if night time sleep has been poor, a planned daytime nap can improve alertness without necessarily affecting night sleep. A twenty minute nap is enough to turn off the nervous system and recharge the whole body. However, a nap that is more than 30 minutes is enough to put you in a deep sleep and leave you feeling groggy when you wake.

Sleeping more at weekends makes up for poor sleep during the week:

You cannot make up sleep that you have lost. Trying to make up for 'lost' sleep by sleeping longer at weekends can upset the circadian rhythm (also known as your sleep/wake cycle or body clock) and makes it even harder to get refreshing sleep. Having a regular bedtime routine is key to getting good quality sleep.

Yawning is a sign you are tired:

Yawning is not always a sign of tiredness. Sometimes we yawn on awakening or during the day if we are bored or even if someone else does.

Counting sheep helps you fall asleep:

Counting sheep can help us fall asleep, but so can counting dogs or cows! It is the repetitive nature of the task that makes you feel sleepy or fall asleep. Whether you count sheep or dogs, the rhythmic task is likely to prevent you from having other thoughts that are worrying and is an aspect of mindfulness that can help to relax you.

What are the benefits of good 'sleep hygiene'?

You feel alert all day, from the time you wake up through a seemingly endless afternoon, right up to your bedtime. You are more focused, more present and have improved concentration.

Good 'sleep hygiene' sets the stage for a restful night when your body heals and restores itself. Getting good quality sleep is important for your health: it strengthens your immune system, helps you maintain a healthy weight, and lowers your risk for serious health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

When the quality of your sleep is improved, you feel better. It can improve your mood and while you sleep, your brain forms new pathways to help you remember information. Whether you're learning a new skill or studying a new subject, restful sleep supports better comprehension and problem-solving skills. Research shows that after a good night's sleep, you are likely to feel more confident and less anxious. There are so many ways that sleeping well makes life hugely better and proper sleep hygiene can help that happen.

Sleep Hygiene Practices that create ideal conditions for a healthy, restful sleep:

- **Set a regular sleep routine.** This means going to bed and waking up at the same time every day (give or take 20 minutes), including weekends. Even if you have slept poorly the night before, it is unhelpful to sleep in. Getting up at a consistent time will maintain your sleep cycle and help you sleep better the following night.
- **Develop a relaxing pre-bedtime routine.** Whether it is a warm bath, reading a book, listening to a bedtime story, or meditating, any relaxation activity about an hour before bed helps to form a bridge between wakefulness and sleep.



- **The ideal bedroom is cool, quiet, comfortable and dark.** The mattress and pillows should feel comfy to allow your body to settle down and relax.
- **Reduce the lights after dark.** Exposure to natural light during the day is important to maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle, but bright lights before bed can disrupt that cycle and make it harder to fall asleep. Try dimming your lights in the evening.
- **Unplug all electrical devices an hour before bed.** The blue light from screens inhibits the hormone (melatonin) that tells our body to wind down. Games, videos and social feeds keep your mind active and prevent you from sleeping. Make a habit to sleep with the phone out of reach, ideally in another room or switched off for the night.
- **Avoid stimulants later in the day.** Try to avoid coffee, tea, fizzy drinks and chocolate at least six hours before bedtime.
- **Stay away from foods that can upset sleep.** A heavy meal, spicy food and fatty or fried food can all disrupt sleep. This is because it takes the stomach three to four hours to digest.
- **Have a regular exercise routine.** Regular exercise can help us sleep. It is advisable that you exercise at least three hours before bedtime, as exercise stimulates your body to produce the stress hormone (cortisol) that keeps the brain alert.
- **Only use the bedroom for sleep.** Therefore, no TV, internet browsing, or late-night messaging with friends and/or partners. The bedroom is a place of rest. Sleep hygiene experts recommend getting out of bed and going to another room if you don't fall asleep within 20 minutes and repeat this process (without stimulating yourself) until you feel sleepy and ready to go to sleep.
- **Limit or avoid naps during the day.** Research indicates that a short nap of 20-25 minutes can lift your mood and leave you feeling refreshed, but a longer nap will affect quality of sleep at night.

Useful websites / Resources:

Guys and St. Thomas NHS -

<https://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/resources/patient-information/sleep/Sleep-hygiene.pdf>

Headspace - <https://www.headspace.com/sleep/sleep-hygiene>

Healthline - <https://www.healthline.com/health/sleep-deprivation/effects-on-body#1>

National Sleep Foundation - <https://www.sleep.org/articles/circadian-rhythm-body-clock>

Sleep Tips - <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm>

Sleep Tips for Older Children - <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/sleep-tips-for-teenagers>



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