

[IMAGE]

Snooze or Lose

A Good Night's Sleep in 10 Easy Steps

By Kathryn Feather

If you are one of the 40 million people in the U.S. suffering from sleep problems each year, you might have a sleep disorder. You don't have to suffer through a lifetime of restlessness - most disorders can be treated with a few simple lifestyle adjustments.

We've all had the urge to hit the snooze button just one more time before dragging ourselves out of bed to meet the day's demands. We've all seen the drug commercials on television promising a restful night's sleep if we would just take one tiny pill. For many, a good night's sleep is a luxury that doesn't come often enough. Some sleep problems are a normal part of life, while others can cause debilitating symptoms and make life miserable. While drugs might be the only option for some, there are some natural alternative treatments that just might get you back on track to a restful night's sleep without all the side effects drugs can cause.

Many of the things we deal with in life can cause disturbances in our sleep patterns. Working long hours, job stress, a sick child, taking care of an ailing parent, traffic noise, lights, extreme temperatures, and caffeine or alcohol can all disrupt our nocturnal clocks. Many of us don't even realize the importance of a good night's sleep and how it affects different aspects of our lives.

A woman lying awake in bed. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Our sleep requirements change throughout our lives and can vary from person to person. Most adults need 7-8 hours of sleep each night, while teenagers and school-aged children need at least 9 hours a night. Newborns can sleep between 16 and 18 hours a day, and children in preschool sleep between 10 and 12 hours a day. But, it's not just the amount of sleep you get that's important - it's the quality of your sleep as well.

When our sleep patterns are interrupted, it can affect our ability to think clearly, react quickly to certain situations and create memories. The pathways the brain uses to help us learn and remember are still active when we sleep. Cutting back on sleep for even one hour can make it difficult to focus the next day and slows our response time. Insufficient sleep also can make us more irritable, which can affect our work and

personal relationships. Studies have shown that people who chronically lack sleep also are more likely to become depressed.

Disruptions to a Good Night's Sleep

Sleep disorders such as insomnia, snoring and sleep apnea are growing problems in this country. Insomnia probably is the most common sleep disorder with symptoms including trouble falling asleep, trouble getting back to sleep or waking up too early. Most of us have trouble falling asleep now and then and that's a normal part of life. Insomnia becomes chronic when it lasts for a few weeks or more almost every night.

Snoring spouses have caused marital discord for decades. Snoring is caused by vibrating in the throat. Oftentimes, snoring can be dealt with by simply changing your sleep habits. Sleeping on your side or back can reduce or eliminate snoring, as can losing weight, cutting down on smoking or alcohol consumption, or buying the convenient over-the-counter nasal strips that open nasal passages to aid in breathing.

Sleep apnea is a very common, yet dangerous, sleep disorder. Sleep apnea occurs when your breathing stops repeatedly during the night. It can stop for as little as 10 seconds or as long as a minute and you wake up struggling to breathe. It becomes dangerous when you can't wake yourself up to breathe. People with sleep apnea sometimes need surgery to make their airway larger, but the most common treatment is a device like a mask that pushes air through the airway. Those with sleep apnea also tend to be overweight so losing that extra weight always is a good option, as is avoiding alcohol, tobacco and sleeping pills.

Many people don't realize what an important part sleep plays in our overall health. A lack of sleep or poor quality sleep can increase the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. Studies also have found that the less people sleep, the more likely they are to be overweight, develop diabetes and prefer eating foods high in carbohydrates and calories. Our body also rejuvenates itself during our deep sleep cycles. Growth hormone helps fuel growth in children and helps build muscle mass and repair cells and tissues in children and adults. We also can fight off various infections when we have a good night's sleep, which helps protect us from getting sick and speed recovery when we are sick.

10 Tips for Better Sleep

While we may not be able to control or eliminate the things in life that keep us up nights, we can learn to create an environment and adopt certain habits that can allow us to enjoy a restful night's sleep. According to the Mayo Clinic and the National Institutes of Health, adopting the following tips can help restore your

quantity and quality of sleep.

1. Go to bed and wake up at about the same time every day. Sticking to a schedule - even on weekends - helps to reinforce your body's sleep/wake cycle and helps you fall asleep faster.

2. Don't eat large amounts of food or drink large quantities of liquids before bedtime. Experts recommend eating a light dinner about two hours before you go to sleep. If you tend to suffer from heartburn, avoid spicy or fatty foods which can cause heartburn to flare up and prevent a restful night's sleep. It's also a good idea to limit how much you drink before bed because you don't want to make too many trips to the bathroom.

3. Avoid nicotine, caffeine and alcohol in the evening. Each of these stimulants can keep you awake. You should avoid caffeine for eight hours before your planned bedtime. Your body doesn't store caffeine, but it takes your body several hours to eliminate it from your body. Many falsely believe that alcohol is a sedative; however, it actually can disrupt your sleep.

A young woman sleeping at her desk. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark

4. Exercise regularly. Regular physical activity - especially aerobic exercise - can help you fall asleep faster and make sleep more restful. You shouldn't exercise within three hours of your bedtime as exercising right before bed can make getting to sleep more difficult.

5. Make your bedroom a cool, dark, quiet and comfortable place. You need to create a space that is ideal for sleeping. You might need to adjust the lighting, temperature, humidity or noise level. Choose blackout curtains, eye covers, earplugs, extra blankets, a fan or humidifier to suit your preferences.

6. Sleep primarily at night. Don't nap any later than 3 p.m. or try to avoid napping altogether. If you happen to work nights, keep your window coverings closed so that sunlight, which can affect the body's internal clock, doesn't interrupt your sleep. If you work normal daytime hours but have trouble waking up, leave the window coverings open so the sunlight can wake you up naturally.

7. Choose a comfortable mattress and pillow. Make sure you have a bed that is comfortable and meets your needs and preferences. If you share a bed, make sure there is enough room for two. Children and pets can be disruptive so limit how often they get in bed with you.

8. Start a relaxing bedtime routine. Start a habit of doing the same thing at the same time each night to tell your body it's time to wind down. What qualifies as relaxing can differ from person to person but might include a warm bath or shower, reading a book or listening to soothing music. If these activities are done with lowered lights, it can help to ease the transition from wakefulness to sleepiness.

9. Go to bed when you're tired and turn out the lights. It is normal for it to take 10-20 minutes to

fall asleep. If you don't fall asleep during that time, get up and do something else. Go back to bed when you're actually tired. Don't agonize over not being able to fall asleep, as this only causes additional stress that will prevent sleep.

10. Use sleeping pills only as a last resort. You should check with your doctor before taking any sleep medications as they might interfere with other medications you already take or with an existing medical condition. If you already take sleep medication, try gradually reducing the dosage to help you quit, and never mix alcohol and sleep medication.

The first step in restoring a good night's sleep is to recognize whether or not you are just dealing with life's stresses or truly have a sleep disorder. Ask your doctor about identifying and appropriately treating the cause of a sleep disturbance so you can get back on track and enjoy a restful night's sleep.

Do You Have a Sleep Disorder?

With the everyday stress of life often affecting when and how much sleep we get, it's sometimes hard to know if we're really suffering from a sleep disorder. According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, you should check with your doctor to see if you have a sleep disorder if you suffer from any of the following symptoms:

- You consistently take more than 30 minutes to fall asleep each night.
- You consistently awaken several times each night and then have trouble falling back to sleep, or you awaken too early in the morning.
- You often feel sleepy during the day, you take frequent naps or you fall asleep at inappropriate times during the day.
- Your bed partner says that when you sleep, you snore loudly, snort, gasp, make choking sounds or stop breathing for short periods.
- You have creeping, tingling or crawling feelings in your legs or arms, especially in the evening when you are trying to fall asleep, that are relieved only by moving or massaging them.
- Your bed partner notices that your legs or arms jerk often during sleep.
- You have vivid, dreamlike experiences while falling asleep or dozing.
- You feel as though you cannot move when you first wake up.

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