Sleep Disorders Australia

SLEEP HYGIENE

What is Sleep Hygiene and why does it matter?

Sleep hygiene (also known as 'healthy sleep practices') describes a range of behaviours, lifestyle and environmental factors that can improve sleep. Sleep hygiene is useful in improving sleep quantity and quality for healthy individuals across all ages and can be used as part of management plans for some sleep disorders.

REGULAR SLEEP SCHEDULE

A regular sleep schedule means going to bed and waking up at roughly the same time each day, while aiming for 7-9 hours sleep (for adults).

Your body clock controls your internal 24-hour cycles, known as your circadian rhythm. Your body clock is responsible for telling you when it's time to be awake and alert, and when it's time to relax and sleep. This system thrives on routine, because it allows the body clock to continue running on a 24-hour cycle while controlling a lot of complex processes behind the scenes in the meantime. If you are constantly changing your bedtime, your circadian system may struggle to adjust. Maintaining a regular sleep schedule helps your body to maintain a regular 24-hour sleep/wake cycle, which in turn, will help you get longer, better quality sleep.

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAINTAIN A REGULAR SLEEP SCHEDULE?

- Go to bed and get up at roughly the same time each day. For example, go to bed at 9pm and wake up at 6am for as many days as possible, which allows enough time to get your 7-9h sleep.
- Sometimes life will get in the way of your routine, which is ok! Try to stick to your schedule as much as possible.
- Some people, like shift workers or parents of new-born babies, may not be able to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Instead, try to incorporate as many of the other sleep hygiene practices into your routine.

DAYTIME NAPPING

All of us have enjoyed an afternoon nap, particularly if we haven't been sleeping well. Here are some tips and tricks to ensure that napping during the day doesn't end up impacting your night-time sleep.

While it's important to get enough sleep, having a nap at the wrong time of day may end up disrupting your sleep that night. This may leave you wide awake or tossing and turning throughout the night, making you more tired the following day.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT DAYTIME NAPPING?

If you need to have a daytime nap, stick to the following:

- Aim to have your nap between late morning and early afternoon, ideally no later than 3pm. The later it is in the day, the more likely your nap will impact your night-time sleep.
- Nap for no more than 20-30 minutes, so you're less likely to enter a deep sleep. Any longer and you may feel groggy when you wake up.
- Make the most of your nap by keeping your sleep environment quiet, dark, cool, and as relaxing as possible.

DIET

We all know that eating a healthy diet is important for maintaining our health, but we rarely think about our diet in terms of our sleep, even though they can impact each other.

Research has shown that people who don't get enough good quality sleep are more likely to consume foods that are high in fat and sugar, be overweight or obese, and develop conditions like diabetes. This may be because when we're tired, we reach for comforting, high-energy foods to boost our mood and energy levels. It's not only about what you eat, but when you eat as well. Eating too close to bedtime can increase the chance of indigestion during the night, while eating a large meal during the night can further impact your sleep quality.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY DIET?

- Aim to eat a balanced diet and avoid foods with high amounts of sugar, caffeine, or fat directly before bedtime while giving your body enough time to digest food (ideally 2-3h) before lying down.

EXERCISE

Similar to eating a balanced diet, being physically active can improve many aspects of health and wellbeing, including sleep.

Physical activity is good for our health but finding the time to exercise can be difficult. Exercise can improve your risk of heart disease, strengthen bones and muscles, and improve your mental health and mood. In terms of our sleep, exercise can influence both sleep quality and quantity.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT EXCERCISING?

- Be mindful of how much you're moving and aim to get 20-30 minutes of moderate-vigorous physical activity each day (for adults). Aim for a combination of both aerobic (e.g., walking, running, swimming) and resistance (e.g., weight lifting, pilates) forms of activity.
- Small changes to general activities can increase your daily activity, such as parking your car further away and walking the extra distance, taking a few flights of stairs instead of the lift, or scheduling work breaks to stand up from your desk and move around.
- You don't have to avoid exercise later in the day, as recent research has shown that it does not impact your ability to fall asleep or your sleep quality in the ways we once thought it did.

CAFFEINE

Caffeine is a natural stimulant found in a wide range of foods and beverages, including coffee, tea, chocolate, soft drinks, and energy drinks. Caffeine is the most consumed stimulant substance in the world, and because of its energising effects it can significantly impact on your sleep.

Caffeine is absorbed into your bloodstream within 30-60 minutes of consumption, leading to the release of a range of chemicals that improve your mood, energy levels, and general feelings of wellbeing. Importantly, the stimulating effects can last for several hours, which means that caffeine can impact your sleep for a while after you ingest it. Caffeine may increase the time it takes to fall asleep, decrease your length of sleep, and cause you to wake more frequently during the night. So, if you're going to consume caffeine, it's important to do it in a way that won't disturb your sleep.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY CAFFEINE INTAKE?

- Healthy adults should have no more than 400mg of caffeine each day, which is about the same as two cups of coffee, three to four cups of tea, or one 500ml energy drink.
- Limit your caffeine consumption later in the day, ideally avoiding all caffeine in the 4-6 hours before bed. If you enjoy a tea, coffee, or soft drink in the afternoon or evening, switch to a decaffeinated and low-sugar version.

NICOTINE

Similar to caffeine, nicotine in also a stimulant. Found in tobacco, nicotine is consumed through smoking cigarettes or pipes, chewing tobacco, and certain e-cigarettes, and can have a significant impact on your sleep.

Nicotine has a stimulating effect on your body and can reach your brain in less than 10 seconds after being consumed. Nicotine activates certain nerve pathways leading to increases in heart rate and blood pressure, spikes in blood sugar levels, and the release of dopamine (a 'feel-good' hormone). People who regularly consume nicotine may have disturbed sleep because they experience withdrawals during the night which can impact brain activity.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY NICOTINE CONSUMPTION?

- Try to avoid nicotine-containing products all together, as it increases your risk of developing a wide range of health problems.
- If you do consume nicotine, limit it in the 6 hours before bed. This will give your body the chance to process the nicotine and reduce the negative effects it may have on your sleep.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol is a naturally occurring substance released during the fermentation of certain fruits, vegetables and grains. Consumed either for its relaxing effects or taste, most adults will drink alcohol at some point during their lives. Small amounts of alcohol can be consumed safely, however, alcohol can have significant effects on sleep.

When consumed, alcohol travels throughout the body, slowing down the central nervous system, causing the well-known relaxation effects. Indeed, some people consume alcohol to help them relax, and some research does show that people fall asleep quicker following

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alcohol consumption. However, sleep may be very disturbed for the rest of the night, leading to poorer quality sleep and more sleepiness the next day. This is just one of the reasons you may experience a hangover.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION?

- Consider the amount of alcohol you're consuming, keeping in mind it is recommended that healthy adults should consume no more than four standard drinks on any one day, and no more than ten standard drinks per week.
- Consider the timing of your alcohol consumption, as it takes several hours for your body to process each drink, so try to limit your alcohol consumption in the four hours before bed.

BEDTIME ACTIVITIES

How you spend your time before bed can impact the quality of your sleep. It's important to be mindful of your activities in the 1-2 hours before sleep.

Everything we do sends messages to our brain about our level of activity and how we need to respond to the environment around us. This is the case right up until you fall asleep at night. It's important that you're sending the right signals to your brain to prepare yourself for sleep. If you're doing something that requires you to be alert or concentrate at bedtime, you may find it more difficult to fall asleep. It is also important to think about the use of electronic devices at bedtime. The screens of televisions, computers, tablets, and mobile phones emit 'blue light' which imitates sunlight and can trick our brain into thinking it's daytime.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY BEDTIME ACTIVITIES?

- In the 1-2 hours before bed, avoid engaging in anything that requires too much alertness and concentration, like working or studying.
- Limit your exposure to 'blue light' from your television, phone, and computer screens in the 1-2 hours before bed. If you can't avoid exposure, perhaps due to work requirements, consider investing in some 'blue light'-blocking glasses, or change the settings on your screens to warmer tones.
- Remember that the only activities that should take place in bed are sleep, sex, or relaxation such as meditation or reading.

DISCLAIMER: Information in this fact sheet is general in nature. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Discuss with your doctor if you are concerned about your sleep or other medical conditions.

BEDROOM ENVIRONMENT

Your bedroom environment can have a big impact on your sleep, but certain factors can be controlled to make sure you have the best sleep possible.

Sleep is controlled by a range of complex processes which function best under certain conditions. The human body is designed to sleep during night-time hours, when it is dark, cool, and quiet. Due to our modern lifestyles, these conditions may not always be met, which can interrupt your sleep, causing more awakenings, and leaving you feeling less rested the next day.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY BEDROOM ENVIRONMENT?

- Make sure your bedroom is as dark as possible. Window furnishings (e.g., block-out blinds/curtains), and covering any sources of light in can help. Eye masks are another option if making changes to your bedroom isn't possible.
- Block out as much noise as possible. Try closing all doors and windows in your bedroom or using comfortable ear plugs.
- Make sure your bedroom is cool and well-ventilated. Ideally, your bedroom should be around 18°C, with air conditioning and/or fans being helpful. If you can't control the temperature try to avoid wearing heavy layers to bed and invest in high-quality bed linen which can improve temperature regulation and air flow.

ABOUT US

Sleep Disorders Australia (SDA) is a voluntary not-for-profit organisation that provides information and support to people affected by sleep disorders throughout Australia. SDA advocates the needs of people with sleep disorders by raising awareness of sleep disorders and their impact on our lives. We also offer support and education with regards to preventing and treating sleep disorders.

We would be delighted if you joined us. Membership is open to sufferers, family members, medical professionals, and the general public. You can join via our website or email our membership officer for more information.

If you would like to support us financially, you can donate via our website www.sleepoz.org.au or send a cheque to our address.

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