

4 Restful Ways to Enjoy a Better Night's Sleep

Sleep is one of the most important - but too often neglected - aspects of a healthy lifestyle. When Shakespeare's Macbeth called sleep "chief nourisher of life's feast," he was certainly providing some sound advice. Many surveys indicate that Americans are not getting enough sleep, which may contribute to a number of problems. Too little sleep has been linked to overeating and overweight, increased risk of diabetes and heart problems, decreased attention span, poorer grades in school, and more depression. For overall health and well-being, as well as success at work and school, a good night's sleep (7 to 8 hours for adults, more for children) is essential for good health.

Create a sleep-friendly space.

A bedroom should be conducive to restful sleep - cool, dark, comfortable, uncluttered, and free of interruptions. Blackout curtains, eye shades, ear plugs, humidifiers, fans and other "white noise" devices can all help make your sleep space as quiet as possible. You can help by putting televisions and computers into another room. Mattresses and pillows should be comfortable and supportive. If yours are more than 9 to 10 years old, they have probably exceeded their life expectancy.

Maintain a regular schedule.

If you want to fall asleep easily and wake up refreshed, it is important to keep your bedtimes and wake-times as regular as possible, even on weekends. This helps to set your internal "circadian" clock or sleep-wake cycle. Regular physical activity can also help you sleep well. For most people, it is better to be active during the day - like in the late afternoon, rather than right before bedtime. Meal time is critical too. It is usually best to finish eating 2 to 3 hours before going to bed.

Rethink your daily drinks.

Alcoholic beverages, and those with caffeine, can seriously affect sleep patterns and nighttime wakefulness. Although we often think of alcohol as a sedative (something to make us sleepy), it actually disrupts sleep. Since drinking alcohol leads to less restful sleep, avoid alcohol close to bedtime. Caffeine is a strong stimulant - increasing alertness and disrupting deep sleep. For a better night's sleep, avoid caffeine for 6 to 8 hours before bedtime. For an easy caffeine calculator, go to www.sleepfoundation.org/site/c.hulXKjM0lxF/b.2419103/k.DEFA/Caffeine_Calculator.htm

Get into a relaxing bedtime routine.

Smart parents know that a regular bedtime routine - warm bath, reading a story, and cuddling a favorite toy - is the best way to get children settled down and ready to sleep through the night. The same concept works equally well for adults - a relaxing, soothing routine that lets your body and brain know that it is time for sleep. Turn the lights down low and enjoy a soak in the bath or a hot tub. Listen to some soothing music and read something light and enjoyable.

THINK SLEEP for DRIVING SAFELY: According to www.DrowsingDriving.org, "Sleepiness and driving is a dangerous combination. Most people are aware of the dangers of drinking and driving but don't realize that drowsy driving can be just as fatal." Driving while drowsy can lead to impaired reaction time, judgment, and vision, as well as problems with processing information and increased aggressive behavior. Always get a good night's sleep - so you can drive safely for everyone.