

7 Hidden Ways to Get Better Sleep

Go From Restless to Well-Rested in No Time

-- By Christine Seymour, *Sparkpeople.com* Health & Fitness Writer



As a college student, I had my fair share of sleepless nights. But as I matured (and learned from the adverse affects I suffered because of those late nights), I began to realize that at the core of a healthy, long life is good sleep. Surprisingly, what we hear about health usually revolves around exercise and nutrition; the truth about sleep—one of the most important factors to attaining vitality—is often left out of the mix.

Losing sleep is certainly not something to be taken lightly. An occasional night of tossing and turning is normal, but continued patterns of this behavior can cause real problems in your ability to function normally. Research shows that inadequate sleep can have disastrous effects on your weight loss efforts, impair your concentration, and even mimic the symptoms of impaired glucose tolerance (which can lead to diabetes and hypertension).

Your mood also suffers when you don't get enough shut-eye, causing you to become disoriented on the job, fatigued behind the wheel of a car, or irritated at home. But more importantly, these mood swings can affect your relationships with others, and even lead to depression.

But the good news is that, starting tonight, you can improve the quality and quantity of your sleep. Here are 7 ways to get back on track. You'll be sleeping like a baby in no time!

1. **Create the right environment.** Get your body and mind in the habit of using your bedroom for sleeping. If you frequently sit in bed to pay your bills, do your homework, watch television, eat, talk on the phone, etc., your mind will expect that the bedroom is for daytime activities. Instead, create an environment that is suitable for sleeping. Equip your room with soft lighting, comfortable bedding, and relaxing music. Other tricks include turning the temperature down a few notches, and turning the clock away from your view. Recent studies reveal that watching your sleep time vanish into the morning hours only makes you more anxious and less able to fall asleep.
2. **Get yourself into a routine.** This is especially hard for people with wavering, active schedules, like students and parents. On busy days, it is difficult—but crucial—to be firm with a routine. If you normally don't fall asleep until the wee hours of the morning, or if you don't have a sleep schedule at all, try going to bed a half an hour earlier each week, or set a time to get in bed and stick with it. Eventually your body will get used to going to sleep at that time and it will begin to come naturally.
3. **Limit food and beverage intake before bed.** As you lie down to sleep, acids in the stomach level out, making heartburn and indigestion more likely to occur. Also, your metabolism increases slightly to digest food, which can also raise your energy level. Stop eating at least three hours before your scheduled bedtime. If you must snack on something, keep it small, and avoid high-fat foods, which take longer to digest. Instead, have a granola bar, some toast, or a small bowl of cereal, but keep your portion small. Say no to stimulants like caffeine and nicotine, which can raise blood pressure and energy levels. Alcohol may be a depressant, but after its sedative effects wear off, your sleep patterns

will suffer.

4. **Consider a natural approach.** Certain herbal teas can help you relax and fall asleep. Chamomile is a popular herb that slows the nervous system and promotes relaxation, for example. As always, consult your health care provider, use herbs and other supplements only as directed, and make sure to read labels. Some herbs may react with certain types of medication or cause adverse effects in individuals with liver disease, Parkinson's disease, and pregnant or nursing women. Other liquids, such as a small glass of warm milk, may also help.
5. **Know when and how to nap.** When energy levels drop around 3-5 p.m., most of us desire a little shut-eye. Napping is okay, as long as you do it wisely. Most sleep counselors recommend napping for no longer than 20 minutes. Exceeding 20 minutes could leave you feeling groggier and make it harder for you to fall asleep at bedtime. If you know you have to stay up late, or if you have an erratic sleep schedule (especially new moms), take a nap during the day. You'll be more productive and in a better mood.
6. **Take control of your worries.** Let's face it—most of us lead very stressful lives. Stress, surprises, and changes can take a toll on your sleep habits. Schedule some downtime each day for meditative activities like stretching or a hot bath. Try to decrease your brain activity before bed by writing down your thoughts in a journal and closing the book on the day. If thinking keeps you up at night, get out of bed and try to be productive. Deal with those thoughts (pay the bill that you are worried about forgetting, make a to-do list, etc.) in a positive way, and come back to bed when you're ready to sleep.
7. **Get a check-up.** If you toss and turn most nights, it may be time to see a physician. You could be suffering from one or more sleep disorders, including insomnia and sleep apnea. The sooner you find out what's wrong, the sooner you can fix it. Sleep disorders are dangerous to your health, so if you suspect something is wrong, tend to it immediately.