

How to get to sleep



If you have difficulty falling asleep, a regular bedtime ritual will help you wind down and prepare for bed.

This ritual depends on what works for you, but the most important thing is working out a routine and sticking to it.

First of all, keep regular sleeping hours, says Jessica Alexander of The Sleep Council – a non-profit organisation that provides good sleep advice.

"A bedtime ritual teaches the brain to become familiar with sleep times and wake times," she says. "It programmes the brain and internal body clock to get used to a set routine."

Few people manage to stick to strict bedtime routines due to life's competing demands, be it work or family duties.

This isn't much of a problem for most people, but for insomniacs, irregular sleeping hours are disastrous.

Most adults need between six and nine hours of sleep every night. By working out what time you need to wake up, you can set a regular bedtime schedule.

Winding down is a critical stage in preparing for bed. There are many ways of relaxing:

- A warm bath (not hot) will help your body reach a temperature that's ideal for rest.
- Writing "to do" lists for the next day can organise your thoughts and clear your mind of any distractions.
- Relaxation exercises, such as light yoga stretches, help to relax the muscles. Don't exercise vigorously, as it will have the opposite effect.

- Relaxation CDs work by using a carefully narrated script, gentle hypnotic music and sound effects to relax the listener.
- Reading a book or listening to the radio relaxes the mind by distracting it.

“Everyone will have their own way of relaxing,” says Alexander. “If you don’t know how to relax, you can get help and advice from your GP.”

No TVs before bedtime

Your bedroom should be a relaxing environment. Experts claim there's a strong association in people's minds between sleep and the bedroom. However, certain things weaken that association, such as TVs and other electronic gadgets, light, noise, and a bad mattress or bed.

“It’s important to create an environment that helps you to sleep,” says Alexander. “Keep your bedroom just for sleep – and possibly for sex.”

Unlike most vigorous physical activity, sex makes us sleepy. This has evolved in humans over thousands of years.

The bedroom needs to be dark, quiet, tidy, smell fresh and be kept at a temperature of between 18C and 24C. “Fit some thick curtains if you don’t have any,” says Alexander. “If there’s ambient noise, consider investing in double glazing or, for a cheaper option, use earplugs.”

A comfortable bed is essential for a good night’s kip. Research by The Sleep Council suggests that a good-quality mattress and bed frame will give you an extra hour’s sleep.

Dr Chris Izikowski of the Edinburgh Sleep Centre, who led the research, says that people benefit from changing their bed if it’s uncomfortable. “It’s likely that long-term insomniacs and those with inadequate sleep habits would benefit the most,” he says.

Keeping a sleep diary

It may be a good idea to keep a [sleep diary](#). It might uncover lifestyle habits or experiences in your daily activities that contribute to your insomnia.

A typical sleep diary should include the answers to the following questions:

- What were your sleeping times?
- How long did it take you to get to sleep?
- How many times did you wake up during the night?
- How long did each awakening last?
- How long did you sleep in total?
- Did you take any sleeping tablets?
- How well do you feel today?
- How enjoyable was your sleep last night?
- How much caffeine did you have before and after 5pm?
- How much alcohol did you have before and after 5pm?
- Did you do any exercise shortly before going to bed?
- Did you take any naps during the day or evening?
- Has anything made you anxious or stressed?

Firstly, your GP or sleep expert will ask you to keep a sleep diary as part of diagnosing your sleeping problems.

“The sleep diary might reveal underlying conditions that explain your insomnia, such as stress or medication,” says Alexander.

Simple lifestyle changes can make a world of difference to your quality of sleep.

Following these 10 tips from [The Sleep Council](#) can help you have a more restful night.

1. Keep regular hours

Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time every day will programme your body to sleep better. Choose a time when you're most likely to feel sleepy.

2. Create a restful sleeping environment

Your bedroom should be kept for rest and sleep. Keep it as quiet and dark as possible. It should be neither too hot nor too cold. Temperature, lighting and noise should be controlled so that the bedroom environment helps you to fall (and stay) asleep.

3. Make sure that your bed is comfortable

It's difficult to get restful sleep on a mattress that's too soft or too hard, or a bed that's too small or old. If you have a pet that sleeps in the room with you, consider moving it somewhere else if it often makes noise in the night.

4. Exercise regularly

Moderate exercise on a regular basis, such as swimming or walking, can help relieve some of the tension built up over the day. Make sure that you don't do vigorous exercise too close to bedtime, however, as it may keep you awake.

5. Less caffeine

Cut down on stimulants such as caffeine in tea or coffee, especially in the evening. They interfere with the process of falling asleep, and they prevent deep sleep. The effects of caffeine can last a long time (up to 24 hours), so the chances of it affecting sleep are significant. Instead, have a warm, milky drink or herbal tea.

6. Don't over-indulge

Too much food or alcohol, especially late at night, can interrupt your sleep patterns. Alcohol may help you to fall asleep initially, but it will disrupt your sleep later on in the night.

7. Don't smoke

It's bad for sleep. Smokers take longer to fall asleep, they wake up more frequently, and they often have more disrupted sleep.

8. Try to relax before going to bed

Have a warm bath, listen to quiet music or do some gentle yoga to relax the mind and body. Your doctor may be able to recommend a helpful relaxation CD.

9. Write away your worries

Deal with worries or a heavy workload by making lists of things to be tackled the next day. If you tend to lie in bed thinking about tomorrow's tasks, set aside time before bedtime to review the day and make plans for the next day. The goal is to avoid doing these things when you're in bed, trying to sleep.

10. Don't worry in bed

If you can't sleep, don't lie there worrying about it. Get up and do something you find relaxing until you feel sleepy again, then return to bed.