

GOOD SLEEP HABITS

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO I NEED?

The amount of sleep required by each person varies – there is no magic number! However, it is recognised that the amount of sleep required is age dependent: experts estimate that preschoolers (3 to 5 years-old) need 11-13 hours of sleep, while school-aged children up to age 12 need approximately 10-11 hours of sleep. After 12 years, this tends to shorten with teenagers needing about 9-10 hours sleep and adults needing 7-9 hours sleep (*figures from the National Sleep Foundation*).

IS IT IMPORTANT TO GO TO BED AND GET UP AT THE SAME TIME EACH DAY?

A consistent sleeping and waking schedule – even on weekends – helps to promote sleep and reduce stress. Research has found that a consistent sleep-wake schedule can help to decrease the time between going to bed and going to sleep, decrease insomnia, snoring and depression and assist in setting and maintaining our internal clock.

LIGHT – IT'S IMPORTANT!

Light is important to our body's daily cycle. Our body has a natural cycle of sleeping and waking – research has shown that even when people are placed in an environment of constant light or darkness outside, they will still have a sleep-wake cycle. The secretion of certain hormones, related to the sleep-wake cycle is affected by darkness and light. Some hormones are secreted in higher amounts during darkness to help us grow and regenerate. The secretion of others, such as cortisol, is stimulated by morning light and prepares the body for activity. Waking with the morning light keeps us in tune with this natural body cycle.

It is vital to the body to be in total darkness for a significant period every day. Research has shown spending up to 12 hours a day in total darkness will decrease major depression without the need for medication. It has also been found that this time need not be spent sleeping – but it was important that it was in total darkness without significant mental stimulation occur. While the mechanism for this it not fully understood, it is assumed that there is a reduction in stress due to the decrease of the stress hormones during the period of darkness.

The colour of the light is also important. Blue light – such as the light emitted by televisions, computers – is more stimulating. Yellow light – such as the light emitted by incandescent light bulbs – is less stimulating. Being exposed to blue light before going to bed will tend to wake the body up and delay sleep. Energy saving light bulbs now come in blue or yellow light; the yellow light is more appropriate for the bedroom where less stimulating light is required at night and the blue light is more appropriate for rooms like the kitchen or study where being alert is important. When people need to get up while it is still dark, the use of blue light in the kitchen or living area can assist them to wake up.

BEDROOM SETUP TO ENCOURAGE SLEEP

A bedroom which is bright, full of noise and chaotic won't encourage sleep! Try to make your bedroom a place of quiet serenity at the end of the day. Restrict light from outside with curtains or blinds and lessen inside light by dimming lights or using bedside lamps. Check out the bedside clock: does it have a bright light which is likely to disturb you during the night? If so, it may be time to change it for one which only lights up when a button is pressed. Decrease noise by turning down the volume of music or television. If you live on a busy street, consider the noise from outside and how you may muffle it such as using heavy curtains which have a dampening effect. The temperature of the room is also important: a slightly cool room encourages sleep. Do what is needed to feel comfortable before you get into bed. This might mean putting clothes away in drawers or pulling all the bedclothes out from the side of the bed – whatever makes you feel comfortable!

HAVE A BEDTIME ROUTINE

A bedtime routine is a wind down that prepares the body for sleep. It should begin about an hour before you intend to go to sleep and may include:

- Turning off the television and/or computer at least 30 minutes before going to bed
- A warm bath or shower
- A period of relaxation such as meditation or listening to music
- Dimming the lights and not using lights that emit blue light
- A herbal tea (such as camomile) or a milk drink (calcium can assist in promoting sleep)
- Breathing exercises such as 4-4-8 (breathing in for the count of 4, hold the breath for the count of 4, breath out for the count of 8 – this helps to relax the chest and shoulders).

If you have a short time between getting up and leaving in the morning, you may like to include preparation for the morning routine into your bedtime routine such as:

- Preparing lunch for the next day
- Preparing and setting out clothes for the morning
- Packing your brief case or sports bag

In addition, the following should be avoided in the hour before bed:

- Stressful, stimulating activities such as doing work or discussing emotional issues
- Exercise (finish exercising at least 3 hours before bed time)
- Eating meals (finish the last meal is best eaten 2-3 hours before bed time)
- Alcohol and caffeine.