



Getting a Good Night's Sleep (Part 1)

(adapted from <http://www.helpguide.org>, www.sleepfoundation.org,
<http://www.bettersleep.ca>, www.css-scs.ca and www.heretohelp.bc.ca)

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Sleep problems are common, but much can be done to improve the quantity & quality of our night's sleep. Many people find that their physical and mental well-being improves when their sleep improves. The cure for daytime fatigue and sleep difficulties can often be found in our daily routines. Our sleep schedule, bedtime habits and day-to-day lifestyle choices can make an enormous difference to the quality of our nightly rest. We can increase the behaviours that improve sleep while reducing the behaviours that interfere with sleep. The strategies described here can improve your night's sleep:

1. Support your body's natural circadian rhythm or internal clock:

- Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day.
- Avoid sleeping in – even on weekends or nights you've stayed up late. If you need to make up for a late night, opt for a daytime nap rather than sleeping in.
- Be smart about napping as this can make things worse. If sleeping well is a problem, consider eliminating naps altogether or limiting them to 30 minutes or less in the early afternoon.
- Fight after supper drowsiness. Get up off the couch and do something mildly stimulating (wash dishes, prepare for tomorrow, make a phone call).

2. Keep your melatonin (sleep promoting) hormones and sleep-wake cycle on track.

During the day:

- Expose yourself to bright sunlight in the morning and/or spend more time outside during the day.
- Let as much natural light into your home or workspace as possible during the day.
- If necessary, use a light therapy box to simulate sunshine during the short winter days.

During the night:

- Avoid bright screens within 2 hours of bedtime, especially the blue light emitted by electronics (phone, tablet, computer or TV). If necessary, you can minimize the impact by using devices with smaller screens, turning the brightness down or using light-altering software that adjusts the colour of your display.
- Say no to late night television. Not only does the light suppress melatonin, but many programs are stimulating rather than relaxing.

- Be smart about nighttime reading. Not all e-readers are created equal. Devices that are backlit are more disruptive than those that are illuminated from the front. Other smart options include e-ink readers that don't have their own light source and of course, good old-fashioned books.

- Be sure the bedroom is dark, the darker the better. Use heavy curtains or shades to block light from the windows or try a sleep mask to cover your eyes.

- Keep the lights down if you get up at night. Install a dim nightlight or use a small flashlight, rather than turning on the lights.

3. Get regular exercise. Research shows that people who exercise regularly (30 – 60 minutes, three times a week) have deeper sleep. Even so, light exercise such as walking for just 10 minutes a day will improve sleep quality. Moderate to vigorous workouts give you a boost of energy, so it's best not to exercise within three hours of bedtime. Low impact exercises, however, such as yoga or gentle stretching can help promote sleep.

4. Be smart about what you eat, drink and inhale:

- Cut down on caffeine intake or eliminate it after lunch. This is especially true for older adults. Sources of caffeine include coffee, tea, soft drinks and chocolate. Some medications for colds, allergies, pain relief and appetite suppression also contain caffeine.

- Avoid alcohol before bed. It may help you relax and fall asleep, but it will make it harder for you to stay asleep. Your sleep will be disturbed, more shallow, and snoring and sleep apnea may get worse.

- Avoid going to bed too hungry or too full. Heavy, rich foods within two hours of bedtime are difficult to digest. Spicy or acidic foods may cause heartburn or acid reflux.

- If you are hungry a light, healthy snack before bed may help promote sleep. Choose between two food groups from the Canada Food Guide or pick foods missing from the day's previous meals (e.g. small bowl of whole-grain low-sugar cereal or granola with milk, banana and yogurt, peanut butter toast, cheese and crackers, veggies and hummus).

- Drinking too many fluids in the evening may result in frequent trips to the bathroom. Caffeinated beverages also act as diuretics, only making things worse.

- Nicotine is a stimulant and makes it harder to fall asleep. If possible, avoid smoking before going to bed or during the night.



5. Wind down and clear your head:

- Relax one hour before bed. Some bedtime rituals include reading a book or magazine by a soft light, taking a bath or shower, listening to calming music, doing some easy stretches, winding down with a favorite hobby, listening to audio books or making simple preparations for the next day. Be sure to dim the lights in the house leading up to bed.

- Save important discussions for the following day.
- Some people lie awake in bed and cannot switch off their thoughts. If this is a problem, set aside some “worry time” during the evening. Use this time to think about your concerns or events of the day, then make plans or identify possible solutions. After this, let these thoughts go until the next day. You can pick them up again tomorrow.

Here are some relaxation techniques:

- Deep breathing. Close your eyes and take deep, slow breaths, making each breath deeper than the last.
- Progressive muscle relaxation. Starting with your toes, tense all the muscles tightly as you can, then completely relax. Work your way up from your feet to the top of your head.
- Visualize. Close your eyes and imagine a place or activity that is calming and peaceful for you. Concentrate on how relaxed this place or activity makes you feel.

6. Improve your sleep environment:

- Keep noise down. If you can't avoid or eliminate noise, try masking it with a fan, recordings of soothing sounds or white noise. Use ear plugs, a sound machine or generate your own white noise by setting your radio between stations.
- Keep your room cool. Temperatures of 16 - 18 degrees C with adequate ventilation is ideal.
- Make sure your bed is comfortable. It is difficult to sleep on a bed or with a pillow that is too small, too soft, too hard or too old. Bedding should be comfortable.
- Dress for the part. Wear loose fitting nightwear made from natural fabric such as cotton, wool or silk.
- Avoid distractions in the bedroom. This may mean removing the television, computer, radio and phone. If there is a clock, it should be covered or turned backwards to avoid clock-watching.
- Avoid using the bedroom as a living room as the brain will no longer link the bed with sleep. The bedroom should be used for sleeping and intimacy only. That way, when you go to bed, your body gets a powerful cue, it's time to either sleep or for romance.
- Reserve your bed for yourself and your partner. Children & pets can disturb your sleep.

7. Stay calm if sleep eludes you:

- Get up if you don't fall asleep within 30 minutes. Leave your bedroom and do something relaxing like listening to soft

music, taking a bath, drinking a warm caffeine-free beverage, having a light snack, meditating or reading a book. Keep the lights dim. Do not watch TV, use a computer or other electronic device or do household chores. Go back to bed once you feel very drowsy. Be consistent with this strategy regardless of your initial experience. Studies show it is very effective in reversing sleep problems.

- Challenge the belief you can't function without a perfect night's sleep. When you can't sleep, it's normal to check the clock and worry about getting through the upcoming day. This increases anxiety and makes it even harder to fall back to sleep. Reassure yourself relaxation and rest are good, it still helps rejuvenate your body. Make relaxation your goal, not sleep. Remind yourself that you can likely do your daily activities even when you feel tired. Do not label yourself an insomniac.

- Postpone worrying and brainstorming. If you wake and feel anxious about a thought or if a great idea comes to you, make a brief note of it on paper and postpone thinking about it until tomorrow when you are refreshed. It will wait for you.

- Be realistic about your sleep needs. Most adults need between seven and nine hours of sleep daily. This includes time spent napping and time spent dozing in front of the TV. Younger people require more sleep. If you are a poor sleeper, it is very important not to spend too much time in bed. If you spend more than eight hours in bed, you are telling your body it's OK to drift in and out of sleep all night. Going to bed later at night may be the single best thing to help reduce your wake time during the night.

If you develop a consistent and peaceful bedtime routine, your brain receives a powerful signal that it's time to wind down and let go of the day's stresses. Remind yourself it takes time to change sleep behaviours and see positive results. A sleep skills diary is available at www.heretohelp.bc.ca to track your progress. Sometimes, sleep problems can be a sign of a sleep disorder, mental health issue or a substance use problem. Health problems like asthma or chronic pain can also affect the way you sleep. Quality of sleep often improves once these problems have been identified and managed. Some medications may also cause sleep problems.

Ordinarily, professionals recommend that you try these sleep strategies before taking over-the-counter or prescription sleeping pills. If you continue to experience difficulties with your sleeping patterns, talk to your doctor/nurse practitioner, pharmacist, respiratory educator or mental health professional. For further information, call the Saskatoon Community Clinic at 306-652-0300. Please watch for the next issue of “Getting a Good Night's Sleep, part 2.” 

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