

10 Steps to Better Sleep

You've been lying in bed for hours. You toss, you turn. You get out of bed, have a glass of milk and try again. You're exhausted but you just can't seem to fall asleep. Sound familiar?

We've all been there at some point in our lives. Often, it's because we can't stop thinking about an important event taking place the next day. Other times, it's because our nights and days are reversed, whether it's due to jet lag or shift work.

Regardless of its cause, insomnia is defined as difficulty with either falling asleep or staying asleep. And it gets worse as we get older. Luckily, as you get older you also need less sleep. In fact, studies have shown that individuals over the age of 60 only need 6.5 hours of sleep to feel well rested.

Here is a list of 10 steps you can take to get better sleep, tonight and every night thereafter. Each step is designed to either reduce tension or change poor sleep habits.

1. *Give yourself at least one hour to unwind before bedtime.* Use this time to read, watch television, listen to music, or simply relax. Do not worry about the day or your to-do list. If you simply can't stop worrying, pick up a pen and pencil and write down all the urgent things that must get done and that you don't want to forget. Then, set the list aside for tomorrow.
2. *Develop a 'sleep routine'.* Doing the same thing every night before going to bed helps your body get ready for sleep. You might try taking a warm bath, reading or doing some other relaxing activity. Soon you'll connect these activities with sleeping, and they'll help make you sleepy.
3. *Go to bed only when sleepy.* Insomniacs often go to bed too early. This is counterproductive because the bed becomes a cue for wakefulness rather than for sleep. There is no sense in going to bed only to lie awake. Do yourself a favour, and postpone bedtime until you are sleepy.
4. *Get out of bed if you can't sleep.* If you can't fall asleep or return to sleep within 15-20 minutes, get up, go to another room, and engage in some quiet activity. When you feel sleepy, return to bed. Do not sleep on the couch, as this would only create an association between sleep and the couch, not with your bed.
5. *Reserve your bed and bedroom for sleep only.* Do not read, watch television, or worry in bed either during the day or at night. When you do other activities in bed, the bedroom becomes associated with wakefulness rather than with sleepiness.

6. *Rise at the same time every morning.* Set the alarm clock and get out of bed at the same time every morning, weekdays and weekends, regardless of the amount of sleep obtained on the previous night. Sticking to a schedule will help regulate your internal biological clock and synchronize your sleep/wake rhythm.
7. *Avoid daytime napping.* Among insomnia sufferers, napping is generally counterproductive. A nap disrupts the natural sleep/wake rhythm and interferes with night time sleep.
8. *Avoid stimulants before bedtime.* This includes coffee, tea, colas, chocolate, tobacco and decongestants. Also avoid alcohol. Though alcohol is not a stimulant, the sleep that ensues after alcohol ingestion is of poorer quality.
9. *Make sure your bedroom is quiet and dark.* If noise is a problem, use ear plugs or a fan to mask the noise. If it is too bright, then consider changing your blinds or wear an eye mask.
10. *Learn to relax.* Relaxation is helpful when stress or anxiety is part of an insomnia problem. A good way to relax is to exercise as it boosts endorphins levels in your body (endorphins are feel good hormones). Just remember not to exercise within a few hours of bedtime as otherwise, you'll feel more awake than sleepy.

One last thing to note: insomnia can also be caused a number of medical conditions such as depression, restless leg syndrome or obstructive sleep apnea. If you think that you may suffer from any of these conditions, none of the above steps will help. You will need to seek your doctor's help for treatment.