

# 10 Tips for a Good Night's Sleep

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How to Sleep Well

[www.howtosleepwell.org](http://www.howtosleepwell.org)

The first step in the treatment of insomnia is to eliminate any contributing factors that contribute to sleep problems. Often sleep hygiene – simple habits one can easily and safely learn – can improve sleep dramatically.

## 1. Dim the lights

Light stimulates alertness. That's a good thing first thing in the morning, but during the evening it can cause sleep disruption. When darkness descends at the end of the day, the light sensitive cells in our retinas signal our brains that it's time to prepare for sleep. The pineal gland switches "on" and begins producing melatonin (aka the sleep hormone), which regulates our sleep-wake cycle, slowing metabolic functions and lowering body temperature. This, in turn, makes us sleepy and less alert. Melatonin levels continue to rise throughout the night and stay elevated until the sun rises, when your pineal gland switches "off".

However, exposure to bright light throughout the evening inhibits the natural production of melatonin, which can interfere with the sleep-wake cycle, and consequently the quantity and quality of sleep.

Managing your exposure to light in the evening is critical to ensuring the natural sleep-wake cycle functions as it should. The last thing many of us do before bedtime is stand in front of a bright light to brush our teeth. Or we check our emails or social media sites one last time (more on that below). To prevent stimulation, dim the lights a full hour before bedtime. Use a dimmer switch to control brightness, or install low wattage bulbs in table lamps. You might also consider installing a flexi bulb, like Philips' Scene Switch bulb, which can be switched from a cool light for daytime and a warm relaxing light for evenings. No special equipment or switches are needed. You simply insert the bulb into your existing light fitting.

When going to sleep, block out all light in your bedroom (blackout curtains are ideal for this). Install a red nightlight if necessary – outside your bedroom. Turning on a light in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom will disrupt your melatonin production.

**Did you know?** Lux levels for pre-bedtime activities, like reading or listening to music, should be less than 180 lux. A typically lit home may have lux readings in the range of 300-500. Lux outputs are determined by the intensity and colour of your lights. To work out watts to lux, check out this calculator here:

<http://www.rapidtables.com/calc/light/watt-to-lux-calculator.htm>

## 2. Power down computers at least an hour before bed

Computers, tablets, mobiles and TVs all emit a bright blue light, and it's this light that the light-sensitive cells of our retinas are most sensitive to. This short wavelength blue

light suppresses the production of melatonin (red light has the least power to interrupt circadian rhythm and suppress melatonin), which throws our body's biological clock (the circadian rhythm) out of whack. Incidentally, today's energy-saving light bulbs, including LED lights and compact fluorescents, produce more blue light than the traditional incandescent light bulbs.

Switch off your computers, mobile phones and TV at least an hour before bedtime, and leave them out of the bedroom. If you check your mobile in the middle of the night, you might find it difficult to get back to sleep. The same goes for luminous alarm clocks.

### **3. Add a red filter to computers**

Install a red-tinted filter on your computer if you need to work late. These work by removing the blue light from our screens. They reflect the time of day, so the later it gets, the darker (red tint) the screen gets. An excellent, free filter to download is f.lux (<https://justgetflux.com>), but there are many others available. Just Google "blue light filter for computers".

### **4. Remove all phones from your bedroom**

Sleeping next to radiation-emitting devices like mobile phones and cordless phones can be a major contributor to sleep problems. Both the handset and the base of a cordless phone emit radiation, even when not in use. Aside from causing other health issues, these electromagnetic fields (EMFs) disrupt the pineal gland and the production of melatonin. (EMFs also emanate from computers, WiFi, and all wireless devices.) Studies have shown that people who sleep with a cellphone by the bed may have poor REM sleep. Remove all phones and wireless devices from the bedroom. If you sleep with your mobile phone beside or beneath your pillow, know that mobile phones have been labelled a "possible carcinogen".

### **5. The right temperature**

Suggested bedroom temperature is between 15 and 19 degrees C (60 and 67 degrees F), but studies show whatever temperature you find comfortable will have a positive effect on how well you sleep. When your body becomes too hot or too cold, your brain alerts you to awaken. For many people, cooler is better, as your body temperature must decrease in order to initiate sleep. Sleep onset (the time it takes to get to sleep), sleep maintenance (remaining asleep), and early-morning awakening insomnia may be associated with elevation of core body temperature. Experiment with keeping your room cool (use air conditioning, a fan, or simply open a window) to find out what temperature suits you best.

### **6. Take a shower or bath before bed**

Aside from the fact that a warm shower or bath is relaxing, stepping out of a shower into a cooler room initiates a decrease in body temperature, which is conducive to sleep. However, an extremely hot shower can raise your temperature too much and hinder sleep. If you already have a hot constitution (you are always in short sleeves when

everyone else around you is wearing sweaters), take your shower a couple of hours before you hit the hay. If taking a bath, add Epsom salts and a few drops of lavender or chamomile essential oil to the water.

## 7. Take a magnesium tablet

Magnesium relaxes the muscles, balances the nervous system and helps us sleep, but in today's busy, stressful world it's estimated up to 80 per cent of us are magnesium deficient. Stress depletes magnesium, as does intense exercise (the more you sweat, the more magnesium you excrete). Alcohol, too, is a known factor in magnesium deficiency. Alcohol acts as a magnesium diuretic. Experts say that our kidneys excrete as much as 260 per cent more magnesium within just a few minutes of consuming alcohol. If you drink excessively, your body will soon deplete all its stores of magnesium. Insomnia, low energy, anxiety or nervousness, muscle aches and cramps, and depression, can be a sign of magnesium deficiency.

Take a high-dose, easily absorbed magnesium tablet an hour before bed. During the day snack on almonds, Brazil nuts, cashew nuts, pecans, kelp and raw fruits and vegetables, which are all high in magnesium.

## 8. Herbal remedies

Several herbs act as mild sedatives, which can help you relax and unwind before bedtime. Take as a herbal tea, add them to your bathwater, or take in tablet or tincture form.

**Valerian root** is widely used to promote sleep, with its sedative properties attributed to a benzodiazepine-like activity. Be careful though; valerian has the opposite effect on some people. Typically, if you have a hot constitution (you're always in t-shirts when the rest of us are wearing sweaters), you might not be able to take valerian. Or you should take it with a 'cooling' herb, such as hops. Take it before bedtime. Don't dismiss valerian if you don't see immediate results. It's most effective when used over a period of time. It may take two or more weeks to see a result.

**Herbs in the mint family**, including lavender, lemon balm, catnip, holy basil, sweet marjoram and skullcap are well known for their sedative properties.

**Hops** are also known for their usefulness for sleep (I don't mean beer). You need the female hops.

**Passionflower** (*Passiflora incarnata* – not the vine we grow for fruit, *Passiflora edulis*, though it may have similar properties) is often mixed with valerian but if you can't take valerian, take passionflower on its own. It's more of a cooling herb.

**Chamomile** is very calming and is great for those who are stressed. Drink throughout the day, 3-4 cups a day. You need more than one cup for therapeutic benefits. It's easy to grow your own chamomile, but make sure you pick the flowers when they are just about to open, or have just opened, otherwise they may taste bitter. Dry the flowers before using.

**Lemon balm** is also great for calming the nerves. You often see this herb in sleep formulas. A nice herb mix is hops, passionflower and lemon balm.

**Kava** is an excellent herb for reducing stress and anxiety.

**California poppy** (*Eschscholzia californica*) is a great sleep herb. You can easily grow your own and harvest the aerial parts (leaves and flowers) to make a tea, fresh or dried, depending on your taste preferences, or buy the dried herb from herb suppliers (like Cottage Hill Herbs). This is great in a tincture too – try making your own.

## **9. Listen to slow music**

Music with a slow tempo can be used as a natural sedative for sleep. It helps to lower heart rate and blood pressure. A study by Salamon et al. (2003) confirmed that classical music significantly decreases systolic and diastolic blood pressure as well as anxiety levels. If you have difficulty falling asleep because of stress or anxiety, try listening to sedative music. A 2005 study of adults between the age of 60 and 83 who listened to 40 minutes of sedative music of approximately 60-80 beats per minute before bedtime for a period of six weeks showed a significant improvement in overall sleep quality.

## **10. Get outside during the day**

Scientists say we need exposure to light during the day that's between 1000-2000 lux to keep our body clocks ticking over. However, most of us work indoors. A brightly lit room measures about only 500 lux compared to 10,000 lux outdoors in the early morning and 100,000 lux at noon. Get outside first thing the morning to stimulate your brain – and again at lunchtime.

Without exposure to bright light during the day, your sleep-wake cycle is disrupted. It can also affect your mood, energy and alertness. It explains why some people are prone to seasonal affective disorder (SAD) during the winter months.

Our eyes become less sensitive to light as we get older, so older people need to be exposed to three to five times more light than younger people. Make sure you get outdoors each day to keep your biological clock ticking along.

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