Improve Your Sleep

Most adults need seven to nine hours of sleep per night, but many college students get less than seven. Shortchanging your sleep leads to serious sleep deprivation, which has a negative impact on mood, energy level, and cognitive functioning, among others. The following strategies may help improve the quality and quantity of your sleep.

- As much as possible, try to establish a consistent sleep-wake schedule. If at all possible, avoid extreme changes in your schedule across the seven days of the week. Varying your sleep-wake schedule by more than about two hours in either direction is like jet lag without going anywhere. Your body takes four to seven days to adjust to a different schedule. If you are changing your sleep-wake pattern multiple times per week, your body cannot adjust. Radical changes in sleep-wake schedule can make it very difficult to fall asleep when you want to, and to wake up when you want to.
- Establish your own flexible routine for bedtime, including a winding down period of quiet activities before getting into bed. These could include non-required reading, listening to relaxing music, meditation, and practicing progressive muscle relaxation.
- Improve your sleep environment. Try to minimize disruptions, such as noise and light. Mask loud or disturbing noises with an air conditioner, fan, music, or other sources of white noise. Earplugs also may be helpful. Try to keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature. Most people sleep better in a cool environment, while warm rooms can interfere with sleep.
- If you are having difficulty sleeping, use your bed only for sleep, not for eating, reading, or studying. For example, if you habitually study in bed, you are programming your body to be alert when it is in bed, which may conflict with your ability to sleep at bedtime.
- If you don’t fall asleep within about 30 minutes, get out of bed and read, listen to relaxing music, or take a warm shower or bath. Try to stay in the dark, or in very dim lighting. Go back to bed only when you feel sleepy. Repeat this process until you fall asleep promptly.
- Practice one or more relaxation techniques at bedtime, such as deep muscle relaxation, deep breathing, yoga, relaxing mental imagery, counting sheep, counting backwards, and similar mind games.
- Regular, vigorous exercise during the day can help improve sleep. However, do not exercise within a few hours of bedtime, because this can act as a stimulant and interfere with sleep.
- Avoid evening caffeine, and other stimulants, including nicotine. If you are a smoker, your sleep may improve if you quit.
- Avoid using alcohol to help you sleep. Alcohol may make you drowsy, but the resulting sleep is not restful.
- Help clear your mind by keeping writing paper or index cards near your bed to jot down worries, ideas, and concerns that you are having difficulty letting go.

- Don’t take over-the-counter or prescription sleeping pills more often than necessary. Sleeping medication is only for short-term occasional use, and loses its effectiveness with prolonged use.
- Stress is the most common cause of insomnia. Learn stress management techniques and, as much as possible, reduce the controllable stress in your life. For example, do you really need to double-major? How many organizations can you realistically participate in this semester? Learn to say "not yet" to some of the enticing opportunities that come along.

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