

IMPROVING YOUR SLEEP

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' remedy for improving sleep. Identifying the main problem with your sleep will help to guide you in what interventions to use – look under the headings relevant to you. It is normal to sleep badly from time to time, especially if you are stressed. Occasional lack of sleep is unlikely to permanently impair your performance or health.

Healthy sleep habits (sleep hygiene)

- Keep a consistent bed and wake time. This gives your body clock the best chance of achieving a regular rhythm. Use an alarm to assist you.
- Ensure the bedroom environment is a good temperature, comfortable, quiet, and dark – you can get block-out curtains, eye masks, ear plugs, blankets and heating/cooling or other equipment to assist if needed.
- Create a *bed-time buffer zone* – at least 60 minutes before you go to bed, only perform relaxing or soothing activities. This means do not study, work, exercise heavily, have upsetting emotional discussions or arguments, or perform other alerting activities in this period. Instead try a warm bath/shower, read a book, watch a movie/television, do some relaxation or anything else you find to be calming.
- Exercise regularly, at least 30 minutes a day. Avoid heavy exercise (e.g. running, weight-lifting, vacuuming the house) in the 1-2 hours prior to bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine within 5 hours of bedtime. Caffeine is a long-acting drug which keeps you awake and is contained within cola and energy drinks, chocolate, coffee and other products (check the label if in doubt).
- Minimise or avoid alcohol use prior to bedtime – although it may make you sleepy at the start of the night, as your body metabolises alcohol it causes sleep disruption, awakenings, and can contribute to nightmares and unrefreshing sleep.

Hints for people having difficulty getting to sleep

- Go to bed only when you are *sleepy* – this means when you are so tired it is hard to stay awake or keep your eyes open. Do not make yourself go to bed early if you do not feel tired yet, as you will probably just lie awake in bed.
- After about 30 minutes if you haven't fallen asleep or if you are feeling alert and frustrated, get up and do something relaxing until you get sleepy. Then return to bed and let sleep come to you. Repeat this process if needed until sleep occurs.

Hints for people having difficulty staying asleep or with unrefreshing sleep

- If you spend more than 1 hour awake in the middle of the night or feel that your sleep is very 'broken', reduce the total amount of time you spend in bed (either stay up an hour later or set your alarm to get up an hour earlier). The more time you spend in bed awake, the more likely you are to stay awake in bed.
- Do not try and make up for lost sleep - Avoid day-time naps, long (> 60 minute) sleep-ins, and going to bed earlier than usual to 'catch-up' on sleep. This will only disrupt your body's natural sleep mechanisms and make the problem worse.
- Remove or cover the clock in the bedroom, to reduce worry about being awake in the middle of the night and 'checking' of the time, which only creates anxiety.

Hints for people who have anxiety, stress, or 'busy mind'

- Try some abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or other relaxation exercises daily – ask us for more information on these if interested.
- Don't use your bed for thinking or worrying. If you cannot stop worrying about your problems when trying to sleep, write them down in a book each night before you go to bed and briefly think of the next step to addressing the problem. If the worry returns through the night, remind yourself that it is already written down and you will address the problem in the morning.
- Where possible, reduce stressful life circumstances or learn strategies to manage.

Hints for people with sleep deprivation due to shift work

- If possible, get at least 5 hours sleep in one block, with naps (15-20mins) if need be.
- Try and have one block of sleep at the same time each day.
- Create a dark and quiet environment for daytime naps.

Hints for people who sleep too late or too early

- If you stay up too late at night and sleep through your alarm or struggle to stay awake through the morning – try to restrict your exposure to bright lights and alerting activities in the evening, to allow you to feel sleepy earlier. Set your alarm for a consistent time each morning and try to avoid sleep-ins (no more than 60mins).
- If you fall asleep before your intended bedtime and wake up early before your alarm – increase your evening activity level along with bright light to help you consistently stay awake until your desired bedtime. This will also help you sleep better in the morning.
- If you are still struggling or your sleep times are many hours (>2hrs) later or earlier than what you want them to be, you may need to see a specialist to assess and treat a misalignment in your body clock.

Other sleep problems or if in doubt

- If possible, get feedback on what is happening while you are sleeping from a bed-partner or housemate - e.g. Are you snoring, having sleep apnoea's (breathing difficulties), repetitive leg movements, or engaging in unusual sleep behaviours?
- Get your sleep monitored by experts:
 - Low-cost: University of Canberra Sleep Clinic. Ph: 6201 5843
Website: <http://www.canberra.edu.au/on-campus/health-and-childcare-services/clinics/private-practitioner-clinics/sleep-clinic>
 - If you have private health cover: Canberra Sleep Clinic. Ph: 6282 4955
Website: <http://www.canberrasleepclinic.com.au/>

Other useful resources

- Keep a sleep diary
- <http://www.sleep.org.au/information/consumer-information>
- <http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/>
- Read *Sleep Well, Live Better* (Wright & Lack, 2010) – available as hard copy or e-book
- <http://www.sleepbetter.com.au> (Morawetz, *Sleep Better Without Drugs*)
- Anxiety/stress management: moodgym.anu.edu.au or ecouch.anu.edu.au