

increasing your sleep savvy

Do you have difficulty falling asleep at night? Once you get to sleep, do you wake up frequently? Do you feel lethargic in the morning? Are you drowsy by midafternoon and unable to stay alert as you go about your day? If you answered yes to one of these questions, you may be one of the millions of people who are chronically sleep deprived and not even aware of it!

To get better sleep, try these insights from Susan B. Sterling, EdD, vice president and director of education and certification at the Cooper Institute in Dallas and Crystal Quintana, a certified personal trainer based in Los Angeles.

[1] Downsides to Sleep Deprivation

Most people are unaware of the extent to which their lack of sleep contributes to feelings of irritability, impatience, anxiety and depression. Sleep deprivation can also affect memory, thinking, reaction time and productivity. It may adversely affect job performance and cause unwanted accidents. Over time, lack of sufficient sleep can have serious health consequences. In fact, more and more studies are showing that getting enough ZZZs is as vital as diet and exercise if you want to live a long and healthy life.

[2] Factors That Affect Sleep

Lack of sleep can be caused by a combination of numerous physical and emotional factors, such as caffeine or alcohol consumption; cigarette smoking; lack of exercise; irregular hours; changes in regular sleep patterns; age-related conditions; sleep disorders; jet lag; or even something as benign as an uncomfortable pillow or mattress! Stress, however, is the number-one reason why people lose sleep.

strategies for better sleep

Practice good sleep hygiene by following these simple steps:

1. Make sleep a priority, like brushing your teeth, eating well and exercising regularly.
2. Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol late in the afternoon and evening. Caffeine and nicotine can keep you from falling asleep, whereas alcohol interferes with overall sleep quality and can cause you to wake during the night.
3. Avoid large meals several hours before bed, and "don't dine after 9" as a general rule. A light snack, however, may help you sleep, particularly if you are really hungry. Also, foods containing tryptophan (e.g., milk) have sleep-promoting properties.
4. Develop a sleep ritual. Following a routine just before going to bed signals to your body that it's time to settle down for the night. Try reading a book, listening to music or practicing nightly relaxation techniques.
5. Keep regular hours. Fall asleep and arise around the same time each day, even on weekends. Avoid napping unless you are sleep deprived.
6. Create a restful place to sleep. A cool, comfortable, dark room (not too hot or too cold), a comfortable mattress and pillow, and a room free of noise work best.
7. Use earplugs, an electric fan or a "white-noise" machine to block out sounds, if needed. If your pets disturb you during the night, put them in another room.
8. Exercise regularly. Physical activity can help relieve daily tensions and stress. However, refrain from exercising at least 3 hours before bedtime, because the beta endorphins secreted during a workout can keep you awake.
9. Take a warm bath before going to bed and try out some aromatherapy products that contain lavender or chamomile.
10. Avoid using your bed for anything other than sleeping or having sex.



[3] Releasing Stress

One excellent way to reduce stress—and hopefully sleep better!—is to try a technique known as "thought stopping." If something is keeping you awake, mentally picture a large stop sign and silently tell yourself, "Stop!" Allow your mind to go blank for 30 seconds, then imagine a particular setting or place that is relaxing to you. Hold that thought for several seconds, allowing the positive image to replace the nagging thought. If the disturbing thought returns, repeat the process until a sense of calm is restored. ■

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