



Are We Getting More Zzzs? Experts Have to Sleep on It

Nine easy ways to get more ZZZs

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More than 70 million Americans suffer from sleep problems, according to the National Institutes of Health. The good news is, many of these issues can be solved by simply changing your daily routine and creating a better sleep environment. “Many studies make it clear that sleep deprivation is dangerous” says University of Tennessee family and consumer sciences specialist Betty Greer. “When tested on driving simulations or hand/eye coordination tests, sleep-deprived people performed as badly as and sometimes worse than those who were intoxicated.” Driver fatigue is responsible for an estimated 100,000 motor vehicle accidents and 1,500 deaths each year, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. “There are steps you can take that can help improve the quality and amount of sleep you have,” says UT Extension Knox County agent Heather Kyle.

Greer and Kyle recommend the following guidelines to improve your sleep habits:

- Dedicate the bedroom to sleeping. A sleeping area shouldn't be a place for work, paying bills, or watching television.
- Make the bed more comfortable. Take the time to make it a peaceful, relaxing place by investing in a new mattress, updating the sheets or replacing that 10-year-old pillow.
- Create a nighttime ritual. For many people, this means starting to wind down about an hour before bedtime, either having a warm cup of decaffeinated tea, putting on lotion, slipping into comfortable clothes or taking a warm bath.
- Go to bed at the same time each night. This will send a signal to your brain and your body that it's time for sleep. In addition, try to get up at the same time each morning, even on weekends. Trying to “catch up” on sleep doesn't work and may cause grogginess.
- Avoid caffeine or other stimulants after lunch. Diet soda, coffee, tea, and even chocolate can stay in the body for more than eight hours, preventing a peaceful night's sleep.
- Give up naps. Daytime naps can interfere with the body's natural rhythm. Most experts recommend powering through the day without a nap, even if it means going to bed at 7 or 8 p.m.

- Include physical activity in your daily routine. Regular physical activity can promote better sleep, helping one to fall asleep faster and enjoy deeper sleep. Timing is important, though. If exercise is too close to bedtime, one may be too energized to fall asleep. If this seems to be an issue, exercise earlier in the day.
- Manage stress. If there is too much to do — and too much to think about — sleep is likely to suffer. To help restore peace, consider healthy ways to manage stress. Start with the basics, such as getting organized, setting priorities and delegating tasks. Take a break when needed. Share a good laugh with an old friend. Before bed, jot down what's on your mind and then set it aside for tomorrow.
- Stay away from alcohol. Although having a glass of wine may seem to aid sleep, alcohol actually interferes with deep sleep, so the effect is only temporary.

How would you know if you should seek medical help for potential sleep disorders? The following sleep problems may indicate the need for medical help and possibly a referral to a sleep disorders specialist:

- You experience disturbed sleep for more than a month without an apparent cause.
- You never seem to get enough sleep.
- You fall asleep without warning during the day.
- Your partner notices that your breathing stops briefly during the night.

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