

Sleep Hygiene Guidelines

by Dr. Karla Benzl

Routine

- **Keep Regular Sleep/Wake cycles.**
This means waking up at the same time daily and going to bed at the same time nightly. Also, sleep should happen at night, with a bedtime preferably before 10:30pm. For most people, sleep duration should be about 7-8.5 hours. Research shows that at least 7 hours is necessary for optimal cognitive function. **Too much sleep can also be a problem.** Set an alarm if you have the tendency to sleep more. **Consistency is key.** Keep in mind that variable sleep schedules can interrupt sleep architecture. This can impact the quality of sleep. It does not work well to have poor sleep habits during the week, and then sleep longer on the weekends. Consistency is much better. For some people, especially those prone to mood swings, it can even be helpful to have a fairly consistent routine of eating, exercising, working, socializing, and sleeping. These habits influence your **biorhythms**.
- **Get plenty of natural daylight in the morning.** This can improve your mood in the day and help regulate your circadian rhythm.
- **Avoid naps, but if a nap is needed, keep it within 20-60mins.** A short nap can be restorative after a bad night of sleep, but too much daytime sleep will negatively impact your sleep quantity/quality at night.
- **Exercise regularly, preferably in the morning.** Avoid intense exercise 2-4 hours prior to bedtime.

Avoid

- **Cut down on screen time and avoid it altogether at least one hour prior to bedtime,** but preferably 2-3 hours. Phone screens, computer screens, and TVs emit blue light, which tricks the brain into thinking it is daylight. This stops the natural production of melatonin, thus resulting in problems falling asleep, and staying asleep. If refraining for screen time is too difficult, you can use blue light filters for your phone or wear blue light blocking glasses in the evenings.
- **Avoid artificial lighting- such as LED lights, 1-3 hours prior to bedtime.** These lights also mimic natural daylight and therefore inhibit your production of melatonin.
- **Limit caffeine to no more than one cup of coffee in the morning.** Some people are even sensitive to one cup of coffee per day, and benefit from eliminating caffeine products altogether. Keep in mind that caffeine has a half life of about 5-6 hours. If you drink a caffeinated beverage at noon, then it will be approximately half the dose around 6pm, and not completely eliminated until a few hours after.
- **Limit alcohol.** Although alcohol can cause you to feel drowsy and fall asleep quickly, it actually disrupts sleep quality and is known to disturb natural sleep architecture. Furthermore, it decreases the natural production of melatonin. Even though you may feel sleepy after drinking

alcohol, you are more prone to waking up more often during the night, even if you don't remember it. Not to mention, you may wake up to use the bathroom more often.

- **Minimize wakeful time in bed.** Go to bed only when sleepy. If waking at night occurs for more than 20 minutes, engage in a relaxing activity with low lighting or no light, and return to bed once you are sleepy again. Staying in bed for too long when you are awake creates an association between wakefulness and the bed.

Environment

- **Limit the bed to sleep and sexual intimacy.** The bed should be associated with sleep, and can serve as a cue to your body that it is time to fall asleep. If you spend too much time reading or watching movies in bed, then the bed becomes associated with these other activities, and not necessarily sleep.
- **Create a comfortable sleep environment.** This means having a comfortable bed, a comfortable room temperature (68- 72° F), silence, and complete darkness. A white noise/pink noise machine may be helpful if you live in loud neighborhood. Black out curtains can help decrease light from your window. You may consider diffusing calming scents such as lavender.
- **Dedicate your evening to relaxation.** Use this time to read the old fashioned way (without a screen, or at least using blue light blocking glasses), take a bath (epsom salts baths are helpful), sip an herbal tea (chamomile+lavender is a great combination), meditate, or practice a restorative yoga class.
- **Avoid upsetting conversations, anxious people, or media in the evening.** This can lead to the release of stress hormones at nighttime, which are stimulating. Difficult conversations with a loved one, reading work email, or engaging with other stressors should wait for the morning.
- **Avoid foods that are high in sugars or harder to digest prior to bedtime.** As an alternative, consider complex carbohydrates that may help transport tryptophan, a precursor to melatonin, across the blood-brain barrier.
- **Manage anxiety.** You can do this by engaging in mind-body practices regularly. Meditation, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, restorative yoga, regular massage, and tai chi are all practices that engage the parasympathetic nervous system, known as the “rest and digest” part of the nervous system. Boosting parasympathetic activity can counteract stress and lead to better sleep.