

Our Smart Guide to Sleep Can Help You Wake Up Feeling More Refreshed

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Learn 35 ways it is possible to achieve a good night's rest

by Robin Roenker, [AARP Members Only Access](#), May 31, 2022



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Since a third of our lives is spent sleeping, you'd think we'd all be experts at it. Yet, for the estimated 70 million Americans suffering from chronic sleep problems, falling asleep — and staying asleep — is anything but easy. If you've spent restless nights tossing and turning chasing sleep that just won't seem to come, you don't have to live in groggy agony. Here are steps to fine-tune your sleep routine so you, too, can drift off to dreamland more easily.



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BUILD A SLEEP RHYTHM

1.

Don't get too hung up on numbers

In your 20s you needed about eight to nine hours of sleep, but in your 50s you need about an hour less, notes Nalaka Gooneratne, M.D., a sleep medicine physician and geriatrician at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine. Listen to your body to find the amount of sleep that's best for you. Some people naturally prefer more sleep — perhaps as much as nine or ten hours — while there are those who prefer five or six. Start by paying attention to your alertness levels during the day as a better measure of sleep quality, suggests Sara Benjamin, M.D., a neurologist at Johns Hopkins Medicine specializing in sleep disorders. If you're always tired or run-down, it could be a sign you're not getting enough — or enough quality — sleep. Sleepiness or brain fog could signal a potential medical issue, such as sleep apnea, so you'll want to get that checked out.

2.

And avoid light before bedtime

To signal your body it's time to begin winding down, do your best to reduce bright light exposure in the evening and at night. Take small steps like using low-light table lamps instead of bright overhead lights indoors at night and wearing sunglasses if you're going to be outside in the summertime after dinner, Benjamin suggests. "You want to prioritize less bright light in the evening, and more bright light exposure in the morning," she says.

3.

Stick to your routine

Once you've found your ideal rhythm, stick with it, even on weekends. When it comes to maximizing overall sleep health, "there is nothing better than routine — it's a must," says Abhinav Singh, M.D., medical director of the Indiana Sleep Center in Greenwood, Indiana, and medical review panel member for SleepFoundation.org. Research has shown that disruptions in sleep regularity — including wide swings in waking and sleeping time from day to day — can negatively affect your metabolism, lead to an increased risk of diabetes, and even damage overall cardiovascular health. In fact, one 2020 study found that having irregular sleep patterns doubled the risk of cardiovascular disease in older adults.

4.

Get daytime light exposure

Light exposure helps drive the body's circadian rhythm, which is a key driver of the natural sleep-wake cycle. The presence of light sends a signal to the body that it's time to be awake — and the absence means it's time to go to sleep. With this fact in mind, you can boost your body's natural wake-sleep differential by getting outside for some sunshine at least a little

while each day. “Light is by far the strongest cue to our circadian rhythm, but you have to consistently expose the body to light and dark cues over a few weeks in order to really set and strengthen it,” says Oregon State University assistant professor Jessee Dietch, a psychologist certified in behavioral sleep medicine who runs the school’s Sleep Health Assessment, Intervention and Dissemination lab. If you live in a region that’s often overcast, as Dietch does, consider investing in a SAD therapy light to boost your daytime light exposure. These added rays during the day could help your body more easily feel sleepy come nighttime, when the lights go out.

5.

Understand your chronotype

Your chronotype is your preferred time of day for normal activities, or your underlying circadian rhythm. Divided into four categories — bear, wolf, lion, dolphin — chronotypes tell you when to sleep according to your internal clock. (Yes, we’ve advanced beyond early birds and night owls!) Most people are considered bears: They sleep and wake according to the sun. The wolf chronotype prefers to wake at noon, and lions like to rise early and are productive until about noon. Dolphins, well, they have trouble following any schedule, and are most productive between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. To find out which chronotype you are, experiment — without an alarm clock — over two to three weeks to find your natural sleep rhythms, suggests Alicia Roth, a clinical health psychologist with Cleveland Clinic

who specializes in behavioral sleep medicine. Go to bed when you feel sleepy. Wake up when your body wakes up naturally. If you find yourself feeling alert and well rested as a result, make this natural sleep-wake cycle your go-to going forward, and read more about your chronotype to tap into more tips.

6.

Limit alcohol

You've likely heard this tip before, but it bears repeating: For best sleep quality, stop drinking alcohol at least four hours before bedtime. "Alcohol absolutely disturbs sleep, so reducing alcohol intake close to bedtime is a solid tip," Dietch says. A drink may initially help you feel relaxed and sleepy, but studies have repeatedly shown that alcohol disrupts the body's normal sleep stages, including reducing the deep sleep and REM sleep cycles that are key for overall sleep quality.

7.

Cut down on caffeine

If you've been having trouble kicking that late-afternoon coffee habit, maybe try again. Or at least order decaf. Science has consistently shown drinking caffeine within six hours of bedtime leads to disrupted sleep. Specifically, late-day caffeine intake can disrupt the body's natural circadian rhythm, prolong the time it takes to fall asleep, and reduce sleep length and intensity. To get a better night's rest, relegate your caffeinated drinks to breakfast and lunch — or skip them altogether, and be mindful of other ways you're ingesting caffeine, like through chocolate.

8.

Try skipping naps

If you're struggling to get to sleep or stay asleep at night and you're also taking daytime naps, they could be part of the problem. Every person has a maximum amount of hours their body likes to sleep per 24-hour time frame, and if you're tapping into that total for daytime naps, your nighttime sleep may suffer, says Mohan Dutt, M.D., a sleep specialist at the University of Michigan Health Sleep Disorders Centers and cocreator of *White Noise: A Sleep Medicine Podcast*. If you must take a daily nap, limit it to 15-20 minutes, Dutt advises. If you have a habit of napping at a certain time or place each day, say in your recliner after lunch, switch up your routine and add a walk at that time to avoid the temptation of prolonged daytime snoozing.

9.

Exercise your brain and body

Getting adequate daily exercise improves overall sleep quality and can help you fall asleep more quickly, research has regularly shown. One 2015 study even showed getting just 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week helped improve participants' chronic insomnia. "I like to say exercise is the best sleeping pill," Roth says. "I very much advocate for people who have retired to find ways to stay mentally or physically active during the day — it's very important to your sleep," she adds. Many sleep guidelines recommend avoiding high-intensity physical activity in the hour or two before bedtime, but recent research has begun to question even that restriction, finding no solid link between nighttime exercise and sleep disruption for most people. So, feel free to get moving, whenever it fits into your schedule.

10.

Have a reason to wake up

It may be tempting to fall into erratic patterns of staying up late and dozing in bed into the mid-morning if retirement leaves you with no clear-cut schedule. To help build a healthier routine — and more consistent sleep schedule — devise fun reasons to get up and get going in the morning. "You need a purpose or motivation to get out of bed," says Rafael Pelayo, M.D., a sleep medicine specialist with Stanford Health Care and author of *How to Sleep: The New Science-Based Solutions for Sleeping Through the Night*. "Plan a regular breakfast or coffee outing with friends or an exercise walk with others," Pelayo adds. "It's a great way to stay connected and give purpose to your morning."



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CREATE A HAVEN FOR SLEEPING

11.

Turn your bedroom into a sleep retreat

“When you start thinking about your bedroom differently and you treat it as a recovery room or a sleep sanctuary, it helps shift your mindset around the products you’re going to put in there,” says JD Velilla, head of sleep experience for Serta Simmons Bedding. Sometimes scent can help, such as lavender, which has been shown to support sleep quality. And keep your room clutter-free, which will make it more comfortable and inviting, making sleep feel like a treat.

12.

Turn the temperature down

Four out of 5 Americans report sleeping better in a cool room than a hot one, according to a National Sleep Foundation poll. Research has shown heat exposure increases wakefulness and disrupts slow wave sleep and REM sleep. To avoid a night spent tossing and turning, keep your bedroom thermostat set between 60 and 67 degrees Fahrenheit. “There’s no magical, exact ideal temperature, but you should feel cold,” says Singh. “Cooler is better. If you’re feeling the need to pull up a comforter, that’s good.”

13.

Try cooling, natural fiber sheets

It’s true that women’s insomnia seems to get worse in the postmenopausal years. Hot flashes can lead to night sweats, leading to an uncomfortable waking. Opt for sheets made from natural fibers, like cotton and linen, which are the most breathable and cooling. Or try percale sheets, with a thread count of about 200 or higher, making it a lighter fabric. Additionally, look for “moisture-wicking” sheets, made from material that can effectively wick away sweat. Tencel and bamboo may also work for you. Also try sleeping on a buckwheat pillow, which is more cooling than traditional latex or down, advises Shelby Harris, director of the behavioral sleep medicine program at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City.

14.

Shut down — and out — light

As mentioned earlier, light plays a big role for our circadian rhythm, which is why it’s important to have a dark bedroom for sleep. It also affects our metabolism, even just a TV, electronics or a street light on while you sleep. One study of more than 43,000 women published in 2019 found that this kind of light was connected to a 17 percent increased risk of gaining up to 11 pounds over five years. It can also elevate your heart rate and increase insulin resistance. Turn off the internal lights, and if there’s light outside, add dark curtains or blackout shades.

15.

Add ambient noise

When you note disturbances, you may discover it's often noise that's disrupting your sleep: outside traffic or sirens, barking dogs, or noisy apartment neighbors. To drown out the racket, consider investing in a white noise machine or using a relaxing sleep sounds app. Experiment to find the sounds that best send you off to slumber. Often white noise is recommended, but try other sonic hues, like pink noise, brown noise or black noise. Each has its own frequencies, so see which works best for you. If those don't work, try apps that mimic the sounds of the wind through leaves or a bubbling brook or that feature gentle voices.

16.

Find your pain points

If you find yourself struggling to fall asleep — or if you awake at night frequently — take a moment to recognize what's interrupting your z's. Are you too hot? Is the room too bright? Is the bedding scratching you? Are your neck and back uncomfortable? Jot the sources of your interruptions down. And then, set out to systematically address these issues via trial and error. Introduce softer sheets or lighter, more breathable bedding. Sample a new style of pillow. Try dialing back your room temperature. Add blackout shades on the window or remove other sources of light. "Look at your sleep environment and notice what disturbs you," Velilla says. "If something wakes you in the middle of the night, write it down and then see if you can find a product or solution for it."

17.

Save your bed for sleep and sex

If you're guilty of reading, working, phone scrolling or watching TV in bed, you may inadvertently be sabotaging an easy path to sleep. Both Roth and Dutt agree: Your bed should be reserved only for sleep and

intimacy. That's it. Unless you're diligent about drawing this line, your "mind starts to associate the bed as a place where you do other things, as opposed to a place where you sleep," says Dutt. If your sleep quality has been suffering, move your pre-sleep wind-down routine to the living room and head to the bedroom only when you feel ready to close your eyes.

18.

Don't go to bed if you're not sleepy

Building on this idea, don't head to bed — even if it is your usual bedtime — if you're not feeling ready for sleep. "Never get into bed with the hope that you're going to become sleepy. That's Sleep 101. It's the most foundational recommendation I give," Roth says. "We don't go stand in front of the refrigerator with the hope that we're going to get hungry. Rather, we feel hungry and then we act on it. It should be the same with sleep: You should feel sleepy and act on it," she says. If you're struggling to feel sleepy, try meditating or taking a soothing bath — and then head to bed when you feel ready to doze off.

19.

Give yourself an off-ramp to sleep

Allow your brain the time and space it needs to settle down for sleep. Make time for pre-sleep activities that relax and calm you as a signal to your body that the day is coming to an end. Do yoga, chat with your spouse, read, listen to relaxing music or a mindfulness app, or journal. Singh calls this building a "ramp" to sleep — or, in another analogy, likens it to arriving at the airport early for your flight. "Sleep is not a switch," he says. "It's like a flight. If you have a 10 p.m. flight, you're not arriving at the airport at 10 p.m." In other words: Don't neglect your nighttime sleep-prep routine. Dietch agrees: "I think it's essential to have

a solid wind-down routine that's at least 30 minutes, but preferably an hour — though some people need even longer," she says. "The more you build that routine and keep it consistent night to night, the more it will set you up to coast into sleep."

20.

Put the electronics away ...

Let's face it, you've heard this tip before, but here's a reminder: Blue light from electronics before bedtime can interfere with your body's natural circadian rhythm and sleep cycles. "For people very sensitive to blue light — which is essentially the same wavelength that's emitted by the sun — light from TVs and phones and tablets can kind of trick the brain into thinking that it's still daytime," Dutt says. If you're severely struggling to sleep well, Dutt recommends cutting off your screen time at least two hours before bedtime.

21.

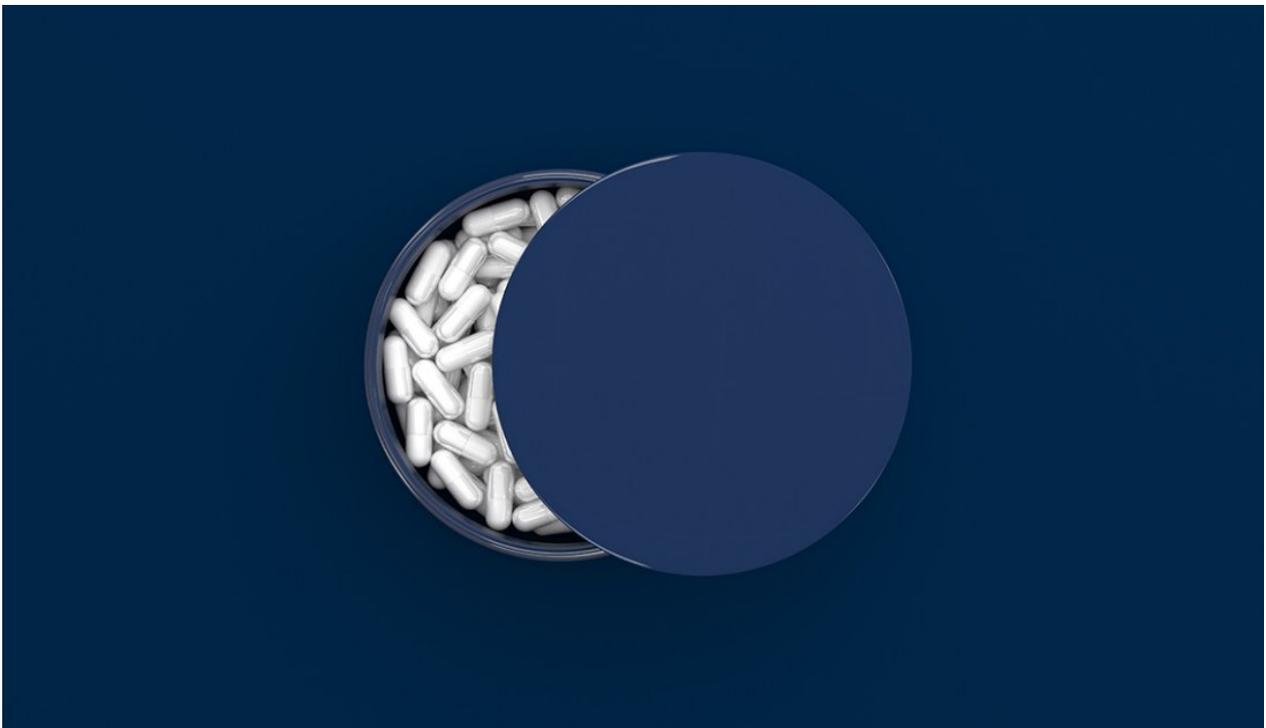
... Unless you're watching reruns

If you simply can't give up your pre-sleep screen habit entirely, take note. Dietch and Roth offer an allowable loophole: Gravitate toward reruns on late-night TV. As long as you're using screens to relax, they can be an acceptable part of your wind-down routine, they argue. "It's more about the function of the behavior. You probably don't want to scroll Facebook or Twitter or a news site before bed — because that's going to get you revved up," Dietch says. "But if you're playing sudoku or watching reruns of *Friends*, I don't have a problem with it." Roth agrees: "I'm absolutely OK with reruns of old TV shows, because it's like comfort food," she says. "You already know what's going to happen. Watching reruns is a great way to wind your brain and body down."

22.

Schedule anxious thoughts

If you're a person whose thoughts tend to run crazy just as you're about to sleep — to-do lists for tomorrow, past missteps, future worries, whether you left wet clothes in the washing machine — try a new approach. Carve out time earlier in your day to have these thoughts and write them down or act on them, as appropriate. “I call it scheduled worry time,” Roth says. By addressing your mental checklist earlier in the evening, say after dinner, you'll feel more proactive because you can still address or tend to some of them (clothes moved to the dryer, check). Above all, if you're in bed and having trouble shutting off spiraling thoughts, get up and do something else. Read for a few minutes. Do some stretching. Listen to a sleep app. Take time to redirect your mind elsewhere, until you feel ready for sleep. “People often ask me, ‘How do I turn off my brain when I get into bed?’” Roth says. “I flip that and say, ‘Don't get into bed if your brain is doing that.’ If your mind is racing, it means you weren't sleepy enough to get into bed.”



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WHEN YOU'RE STRUGGLING

23.

Recognize shifting sleep patterns

If you feel like your sleep quality has been declining the older you get, you might be right. “People tend to have 2 to 3 percent less deep sleep per decade [of age],” Benjamin says. “Plus, as people get older, they tend to take longer to fall asleep.” Some of these sleep pattern shifts are normal, but if you frequently find yourself lacking energy or feeling sleepy during the daytime, consider taking steps — like the ones outlined here — to get back in control of your sleep rhythms. And, if you’re truly struggling, speak up. “You should make sleep health part of your routine conversations with your physician at your annual wellness checkups,” Singh says. “Once you get past 50, sleep problems become more prevalent.”

24.

Get checked for sleep apnea

If you snore loudly — especially if your sleep partner says they sometimes hear you gasping for air — ask your doctor if you could have sleep apnea, a potentially serious sleep disorder that causes disrupted breathing. “Not everyone who snores has sleep apnea, but it’s a pretty good indicator that you could have sleep apnea,” Dutt says. While obstructed sleep apnea commonly affects men and those with high BMI, the truth is “anyone can have sleep apnea,” Roth says. Your physician may send you to a sleep lab for an overnight sleep test or order an at-home sleep apnea test as a first step in screening you for the condition. Don’t let embarrassment about snoring prevent you from seeking an evaluation. Left untreated, sleep apnea can lead to a host of health problems, including diabetes, stroke and heart attacks.

25.

Time your prescriptions

The timing of your prescriptions and supplements can affect your sleep. Some, such as diuretics for blood pressure, can lead to more nighttime trips to the bathroom, says Karl Doghramji, M.D., director of the Jefferson Sleep Disorders Center in Philadelphia. Others, like antidepressant SSRIs, can energize or sedate. Ask your doctor about the best time to take your meds to ensure they won't interfere with your bedtime.

26.

Don't use antihistamines to sleep

Although Benadryl's welcomed side effect can be drowsiness, sleep experts caution against relying on them as a sleep aid. Typically the sleep isn't quality, and Benadryl's other side effects — altered mental state, urinary retention, constipation and dry mouth — can lead to more problems. But the biggest reason to skip? There's mounting evidence that taking Benadryl, or other anticholinergic medications, longterm, can cause confusion, lead to falls and may even raise your risk of developing dementia.

27.

Look closely at supplements

Don't take melatonin or other herbal or hormonal supplements marketed as sleep aids without talking to your doctor first. You might be surprised to learn that "the American Academy of Sleep Medicine does not recommend the use of melatonin for the treatment of insomnia," Dutt says. "We do prescribe melatonin, but only for other, specific sleep disorders." While every now and then is OK, but if you're taking it more than once a week, you're doing more harm than good. Use it sparingly, like for getting over jet lag.

28.

Have your eyes checked

If you're experiencing erratic sleep patterns — such as falling asleep early in the evening — cataracts could be the culprit. “Folks who have cataracts don't get as much light coming into their eyes. So, there's not a strong signal to the brain that it's still daylight out and they may fall asleep a little earlier,” Pelayo explains. Get your eyes checked and see about cataract correction surgery, if needed. Studies have shown that patients sleep better and have improved circadian rhythm once their cataracts are removed.

29.

Think twice before reaching for sleep aids

Following guidelines set by the American Geriatrics Society, most physicians avoid prescribing sleep aids for patients over 65 because these drugs are associated with an increased risk for falls, which is especially dangerous for older adults, Dutt says.

Prescription sleep aids

have also been linked to a host of potential health side effects with long-term use, including hallucinations, cardiovascular disease and even an increased risk of cancer. While very occasional use of over-the-counter (OTC) sleep aids may be safe, don't fall into a pattern of dependency on them. Studies have suggested that long-term, frequent use of certain OTC sleep medications can lead to an increased risk of dementia. “If you find yourself reaching for these bottles every night, it's time to have a talk with a professional,” says Singh.

30.

Don't just toss and turn

If you can't sleep, don't just lie there. Tossing and turning or staring anxiously at the clock will just make things worse. “If you're not sleeping, leave the bed,” Singh says. Even better: Leave the bedroom entirely. Go into a different room. Read a book under a dim light. Listen to some music. Do a mindless chore like folding clothes. Then, when you feel drowsy, go back to bed. “You want to avoid any time in bed that you're not sleeping,” Dutt says.

31.

Remember that sleep is a skill

“It’s a skill to sleep well,” Roth says. “We can learn to get better at it.” If you’re struggling to fall asleep or stay asleep, take heart in knowing you can improve your sleep quality with practice and careful adherence to a curated routine — or with help from a specialist in behavioral sleep or sleep medicine, if needed.

32.

Try not to get frustrated

Losing sleep and feeling tired night after night isn’t fun or healthy. But as challenging as it may be, try not to get caught up in a cycle of frustration — that will only make things worse. “Sleep is one of those things that the harder you try to grasp onto it, the more it can elude you,” Dietch says. Singh agrees: “If you have poor sleep, you start worrying about not sleeping well, and that begets more poor sleep. You have to break those rhythms.”

33.

Find a tailored solution

Your neighbors swear by their white noise machine. Your brother-in-law insists an orthopedic pillow is the key to blissful sleep. Even the guy at the gym had an idea to share when you mentioned you’ve had trouble sleeping. You’ve likely heard them all. But be aware: Sleep routines that work for others may not immediately work for you. Use trial and error to discover the wind-down activities and bedroom ambiance settings that best fit your own sleep style. “Sleep behaviors and sleep skills are not a one-size-fits-all thing. They’re very individual,” Roth says. “A lot of people feel frustrated when they come to us [at

Cleveland Clinic]. They're smart. They've looked online and read all the general recommendations, but perhaps they've not applied to them. Sometimes the solution has to be very tailored to you and your own needs.”

34.

Look at other health issues

The number of health conditions linked to poor or inadequate sleep is almost endless, with obesity, diabetes and heart disease topping the list. Restless leg syndrome, which is more common in older adults and frequently occurs at night, could also keep you from sleeping. Menopause, chronic pain, a stressful or traumatic experience, depression and more can all affect your sleep, and the root cause to insomnia may be one or many factors. The key is to pay attention to your health and talk to your health team if you've experienced any recent changes in your life that could affect your slumber.

35.

Seek professional help if needed

If you are struggling with chronic insomnia or another sleep disorder — such as sleep apnea, restless leg syndrome or narcolepsy — don't put off seeking professional help. Sleep specialists can help steer you to an appropriate treatment, so you don't have to suffer sleepless nights alone. In the case of insomnia, in particular, cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is particularly effective. Studies have shown between 50 and 75 percent of CBT-I participants experienced improved overall sleep quality following treatment. “It works amazingly well, and yet there's a PR problem, since so many people don't know about it,” Dietch says. To find someone trained in CBT-I, search for sleep psychologists or dedicated sleep clinics in your area.