

The York University Staff Association Health and Wellness

News and Views

It may seem obvious that sleep is beneficial. Even without fully grasping what sleep does for us, we know that going without sleep for too long makes us feel terrible, and that getting a good night's sleep can make us feel ready to take on the world.



Lack of shut-eye doesn't just leave you foggy the next day: chronic, long-term insufficient sleep ups your odds of diabetes, depression, cardio-vascular disease and even weight gain. Some professionals even say that sleep is as vital to the human body as oxygen. So the question is what to do... The cure to sleep difficulties can often be found in your daily routine. Your sleep schedule, bedtime habits and day to day lifestyle choices make an enormous difference in the quality of your nightly sleep. Hopefully the following sleep tips will help you optimize your nightly rest, minimize insomnia and allow for all day energy.

By learning to avoid common enemies of sleep and trying out a variety of healthy sleep promoting techniques, you can discover your own remedy for a good night's sleep. The key is to experiment. What works for some might not work as well for you.

Consistency is important. Studies show that if you keep a regular sleep schedule, going to bed at the same time every night, you will feel much more refreshed and energized than if you sleep the same number of hours at different times.

Sleep Environment. It's not just the number of hours in bed that counts, but rather the quality of those hours. If you're giving yourself enough time for sleep but you're still having trouble getting up in the morning or staying alert throughout the day, you may need to make some changes to your sleep environment. When it is time to sleep make sure that your environment is dark. Even dim lights especially those from TV or a computer screen can confuse the body clock.

The temperature of your room also affects sleep. Most people sleep best in a cooler room. Make sure your bed is comfortable. You should have enough room to stretch and turn comfortably. Your mattress and bedding are also important. If you find you are waking up with a sore back or neck, you may need to invest in a new mattress or try a different pillow. Experiment with different levels of firmness, foam or egg crate toppers. You may also want to try pillows that provide more support. I have heard that water pillows can often help with neck and back pain.

Eating right and regular exercise Your daytime eating and exercise habits play a role in how well we sleep. The hours leading up to bed time are the most important.

Cut down on caffeine. You might be surprised to find out that drinking caffeine ten to twelve hours before bedtime can cause sleep problems. Eliminating caffeine after lunch will really help if you are having trouble sleeping.

Quit smoking. Obviously smoking causes health trouble in many ways. Nicotine is a stimulant, and can disrupt sleep. Smokers actually experience nicotine withdrawal as the night goes on, thus making it hard to stay asleep for the amount of hours your body needs.

Avoid alcohol before bed. Many people think that a night cap before bed will help them sleep. While you may fall asleep faster, alcohol reduces your sleep quality, waking you up throughout the night. To avoid this effect, do not drink alcohol too close to bed time.

Stay away from big meals at night. Try to eat dinner earlier in the evening. Avoid heavy rich foods within a few hours of bedtime. Fatty foods are hard for your stomach to digest, which may keep you up. Spicy or food high in acidity can also cause stomach trouble and heartburn. If you find that you are hungry before bed, a light snack can actually promote sleep. Foods containing carbohydrates and calcium help calm the brain. Experiment with your food habits to determine what works best for you. For a relaxing bedtime snack, try:

- Half a peanut butter or turkey sandwich.
- A small bowl of whole grain low sugar cereal.
- Granola with low-fat milk or yogurt.
- A banana and a cup of hot decaffeinated tea.

Regular Exercise As little as twenty or thirty minutes of daily exercise can directly benefit your quality of sleep. You can break it up into five minutes here or there and still get the benefits. Try a brisk walk or run, a bicycle ride or even gardening or house work. Better yet, come out and participate in YUSA's lunchtime fitness program. I'm sure you will find that just that half hour out of your day will make a big difference in the quality of your night's sleep. Do your best to schedule your workout earlier in the day. Exercising too late in the day actually stimulates the body, obviously the opposite of what you want near bedtime. That being said, don't feel like you need to be glued to the couch in the evening though. Relaxing exercises like yoga or a gentle stretch should not interfere with your sleep.

Anxiety and Stress Stress, worry and anger from your daily life can make it difficult to sleep well. When you wake in the night or can't get back to sleep, take a moment to think about what it is that is causing you to wake. Hopefully that will help you figure out what you need to do to get your stress and anger under control. If the stress of managing work, family, and/or school is keeping you awake, you need to try to handle stress in a productive way throughout the day, by learning how to manage your time effectively. Try to maintain a calm, positive outlook. If your stresses are unmanageable or you feel you could use some support – don't forget about our Employment Assistant Program (EAP). You can contact them at 1-800-387-4765.



Relaxation Techniques. I have talked about the importance of relaxation in past newsletters. Relaxation really is beneficial for everyone, but especially for those of us struggling to sleep. Practicing relaxation techniques is a great way to wind down, and prepare yourself for sleep. Here are some simple relaxation techniques:

Deep Breathing. Close your eyes, and try taking deep breaths, making each breath deeper than the last.

Progressive muscle relaxation. Starting at your toes, tense all the muscles as tightly as you can, then completely relax. Work your way up from your feet to your facial muscles.

Visualizing a peaceful place. Close your eyes and try to imagine one of your favourite peaceful and calming places. Concentrate on how relaxed this place makes you feel.

Reserve your bed for sleeping If you associate your bed with things like work (bringing your laptop into bed) or errands (folding laundry in bed), it will be harder to wind down and fall asleep at night. Use your bed only for relaxation and sleeping. That way hopefully when you go to bed, your body gets a powerful cue that it's time to shut down.

In order to change we must be sick and tired of being sick and tired. ~Author Unknown

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