

# HOW TO GET BETTER SLEEP: TEN WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP HEALTH

MODULE 2 • BALANCED LIFE • WHOLE-PERSON PROGRAM



## What is “sleep health”?

Maybe you aim to exercise 30 minutes each day. Maybe you try to eat something green with each meal. Maybe you drink as much water as possible during the day. Overall, you actively work to maintain good health by eating healthy foods, staying active, and keeping hydrated.

But do you try to get a good night’s sleep every night? If you don’t consider sleep part of your wellness routine, you might want to reconsider! Getting a good night’s sleep – in terms of both quantity and quality – is an incredibly important aspect of health, and it can impact everything.

## How many hours of sleep do I need?

Adults aged 25 and older should aim for 7–9 hours of sleep – and no less than six hours. What does that look like? If you have to get up at 7am to leave for work at 8am, you should be asleep no later than 11pm the previous night. To be in bed and asleep by 11pm, you’ll likely have to get into bed by 10:30pm.

Getting into bed at the same time every night allows your body to get into a sleep schedule so you’ll have an easier time falling asleep each night and, hopefully, staying asleep throughout the night.

## How does poor sleep impact health?

A poor night’s sleep, whether you climbed into bed later than you wanted or couldn’t stay asleep, can have both short-term and long-term effects on health. Many adults will experience short-term insomnia, lasting a few days or weeks, at some point in their lives.

In the short-term, sleep deprivation can cause:

- increased stress responsivity (you’re more likely to react to stress)
- increased pain sensitivity
- emotional distress, anxiety, and irritability

- deficits in cognition, memory, and performance, such as reduced coordination
- metabolic changes, such as increased levels of ghrelin (the hunger hormone) and decreased levels of leptin (the appetite-control hormone)

Have you noticed that you're hungrier the day after a poor night's sleep? Glucose metabolism – how your body responds to and metabolizes sugar from the food you eat – is dysregulated after just one night of poor sleep. This means you're likely to eat more, and crave more unhealthy foods, after one (or many) night of sleep deprivation!

In the long-term, sleep deprivation can contribute to:

- increased risk of obesity (a 50% increased risk for obesity if you get less than 5 hours of sleep each night on a regular basis)
- increased risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure reduced immunity
- increased risk for dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and premature aging
- Some research has connected insomnia with a higher risk of Alzheimer's. The glymphatic system is most active during sleep. This is the system that gets rid of toxins the brain accumulates during the day. If you don't get adequate sleep every night, your brain can't get rid of toxins effectively, specifically the amyloid plaques that are typically found in people with Alzheimer's disease.

The good news is that if you can resolve insomnia so that it doesn't extend longer than a few days or weeks, the long-term impact on your health won't be significant.

## How do I improve my sleep health and get my recommended hours of sleep each night?

Nobody's perfect. Maybe you went out to dinner with friends and got home late, or you got into bed early but had trouble falling asleep because your mind was racing. We've all been there! You do the best you can do and try a variety of strategies to figure out what works for you.

## Here are 10 ways to improve your sleep and potentially increase the number of hours you're sleeping (and staying asleep) each night:

**1. Exercise regularly and find the best workouts for you and your body.** Studies have shown that a regular exercise routine has a strong impact on getting better sleep over time. It might take a while to notice significant effects, but that's no reason to not exercise! The incremental benefits help establish a desired sleep schedule by regulating your circadian rhythm so that you go to bed tired and wake up refreshed. Regular exercise also improves mood and decreases stress, which supports better mental health overall.

The type of exercise you do, and when you do it, can also make a difference. The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) recommends doing cardio in the morning to allow your body to experience a dip in blood pressure that you would normally have during a good night's sleep. The NSF also advocates for strength training whenever possible, so try out a morning and evening weight session and see how your sleep fares!

A rigorous workout late in the evening – close to when you'll climb into bed – may negatively impact sleep quality as it can raise body temperature, leading to interrupted sleep. Honor bio-individuality by experimenting with when you exercise and noticing how it affects your sleep. You might want to keep a journal to notice any patterns.

**2. Limit caffeine (and we're not just talking about coffee!).** Caffeine is a stimulant, and everyone metabolizes it differently, making its effect on mood and alertness different from person to person. Although there's no nutritional need for caffeine, the recommended amount of caffeine per day is around 250 milligrams, or three 8-ounce cups of coffee. Other drinks and foods that contain caffeine are tea, soda, chocolate, and even some supplements and over-the-counter drugs, such as headache relievers. If you're not sleeping well, and you don't drink coffee or tea, take a look at what you're having for dessert or taking close to bedtime that might contain caffeine.

**3. Limit blue light before bed.** Blue light, or blue wavelengths, are beneficial during daylight hours because they can help boost mood and attention but seem to have the opposite effect at night. This is because light generally suppresses the natural production of melatonin, a hormone that influences your circadian rhythm and impacts your ability to fall and stay asleep. Studies have shown that blue light suppresses this production even more than natural or artificial light.

The best way to prevent suppression of melatonin production before bed is to avoid looking at bright screens 2 to 3 hours before going to sleep, including your phone and TV. For example, for a 10:30pm bedtime, try to avoid screens after 7:30pm.

Can't quite make that change yet? Try blue light glasses, which limit up to 90% of blue light wavelengths emitted by screens. You can wear blue light glasses to reduce exposure when watching TV or using your phone. You can also turn your phone to "Night Mode." This adjusts the screen to emit a warmer light, which can help your body prepare for sleep.

**4. Optimize your sleeping environment.** Creating a space where you feel calm and soothed is a key factor in supporting sleep health. The National Sleep Foundation offers six easy and cost-conscious tips for designing your sleep space:

- 1) Use darkening shades and light dimmers to keep the room dark at night.
- 2) Choose soothing colors and keep clutter at bay.
- 3) Keep the room comfortably cool.
- 4) Select bedding, pillows, etc., that are most comfortable to you.
- 5) Reduce outside noise as much as possible with a sound machine or fan.
- 6) Use a soothing scent, such as lavender, for ultimate relaxation.

**5. Pay attention to the timing of your meals.** Your body contains a "body clock," otherwise known as a circadian rhythm, and it's responsible for every biological process in your cells that impacts sleep, hormone levels, and even how you respond to medication. This clock is located in your hypothalamus, and it syncs with your environment through exposure to daylight. There's also evidence that it syncs depending on when you eat.



Research has found that insulin, the hormone released to regulate blood sugar when eating a meal, “can act as a timing signal to cells throughout our body.” This means that eating during times when your body thinks you should be asleep can severely impact your circadian rhythm and your health. A classic example is people who work overnight shifts and have to eat and sleep on opposite schedules.

For the majority of people not working overnight shifts, it’s recommended to eat your last meal at least three hours before going to bed to give your body adequate time to digest and make sure you’re sending the proper signals to your body to wind down for the night.

**6. Eat well.** The best foods for sleep health are also great for overall health. Staying away from processed foods, including sugar, is key. Eating a balanced diet with lots of healthy fats, quality protein (meat or plant-based), fiber-rich fruits and vegetables, and whole grains all support restful and effective sleep.

**7. Supplement well, if needed.** Melatonin, a hormone produced by your pineal gland that regulates your circadian rhythm, is what tells the body when to sleep and when to wake up. Melatonin has become a popular supplement to help regulate sleep, but while it can help tell your body when it’s time to go to sleep, it doesn’t actually make you fall asleep. As with any supplement, you should consult with your healthcare practitioner about whether it’s right for you.

Magnesium is also popular to help regulate sleep, but like melatonin supplements, it doesn’t make you fall asleep. Magnesium releases tension in your muscles and calms anxiety, both of which can help you sleep better.

**8. Use meditation and breathing techniques.** Do you meditate? Maybe it’s time to start! Mindful meditation, which focuses on breathing and bringing your attention to the present, can help train you to break the pattern of negative, stressful thoughts by evoking the relaxation response.

In addition to meditation, breathing techniques have been proven to help relax the body. The 4-7-8 breathing technique that can help reduce anxiety, manage cravings, control anger responses, and most importantly get you to fall asleep! Essentially, you inhale for four counts, hold for seven counts, and exhale for eight counts. Check out the breathing exercises PDF on how to practice this breathing technique.

**9. Set a consistent sleep schedule to create better sleep habits.** Creating healthy sleep habits may seem daunting, but start small. Maybe you commit to turning off all screens a few hours before bed before slowly implementing other changes, such as going without that second cup of coffee in the afternoon or a chocolate dessert. From there, you might experiment with getting into bed at the same time each night. You may notice that you feel – and sleep – better quicker than you expected!

**10. Be kind to yourself.** Don't beat yourself up for staying awake to finish the last chapter of a book or catching up with an old friend over dinner. As we said, nobody's perfect, and you have to live your life! Becoming more mindful of your sleep habits is the first step toward better sleep.