

10 WAYS TO SLEEP BETTER

Feeling crabby lately? It could be you aren't getting enough sleep. Although the average adult needs seven to nine hours of sleep a night, that number could be hard to come by if you factor in work, taking care of children and managing a household.

Then there are the unexpected challenges that can keep you up at night — financial worries, layoffs, illness or relationship issues.

Compounding the problem is the fact that if you don't get the rest you'll find it even harder to deal with the stresses causing your sleep to begin with.

Grumpiness isn't the only result of sleep deprivation. Getting too little sleep impairs me time and alertness. Tired people are less productive at work, less patient with others and less interactive in relationships.

Sleep deprivation can also be dangerous. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 100,000 crashes each year are due to drivers falling asleep.

John Shepard Jr., M.D., of the Sleep Disorders Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., offers tips to help you achieve restful sleep. You don't have to use every tip on the list.

"What works for one person doesn't always work for another," Dr. Shepard says.

Try one or two of the following tips or a combination until you have enough quality sleep to feel alert and well-rested. If these tips don't work, see your doctor. You could have a sleep disorder, such as obstructive sleep apnea, that requires medical attention.

1. Stick to a schedule, and don't sleep late on weekends. If you sleep late on Saturday and Sunday morning, you'll get Sunday night

insomnia. Instead, go to bed and get up at about the same time every day.

"You don't need to rely on an alarm clock to wake up when you get enough sleep," say

2. Don't eat or drink a lot before bedtime. Eat a light dinner about two hours before you drink too much liquid before sleeping, you'll wake up repeatedly in the night for the bathroom.

Don't eat spicy or fatty foods. They can cause heartburn, which may interfere with you

If you get the bedtime munchies, eat something that triggers serotonin, which makes you sleepy. Carbohydrates (bread or cereal) or foods containing the amino acid L-tryptophan (milk, turkey) will do the trick.

Don't drink alcohol near bedtime. It may cause you to wake up repeatedly, to snore, and to exacerbate sleep apnea.

3. Avoid caffeine and nicotine. They're addictive stimulants and keep you awake. So avoid them. Experience withdrawal symptoms at night, and smoking in bed can be dangerous. Caffeine is avoided for eight hours before your desired bedtime.

4. Exercise. If you're trying to sleep better, the best time to exercise is in the afternoon. Regular physical activity enhances the quality of nocturnal sleep.

5. A slightly cool room is ideal for sleeping. This mimics your internal temperature at night, so turn off the heat and save on fuel bills.

If you tend to get cold, use blankets. Try sleeping in warmer nightclothes and wear socks.

If you overheat at night, wear light nightclothes and sleep under a single sheet. Use an air conditioner or fan to keep the room cool.

Use a dehumidifier if you're bothered by moist air. Use a humidifier if you're bothered by dry air. Signs and symptoms of dry air irritation include a sore throat, nosebleeds and a dry throat.

6. Sleep primarily at night. Daytime naps steal hours from nighttime slumber. Limit naps to less than one hour, no later than 3 p.m.

If you work nights, keep your window coverings closed so that sunlight, which interferes with the body's internal clock, doesn't interrupt your sleep.

If you have a day job and sleep at night, but you still have trouble waking up, leave the window coverings open and let the sunlight wake you up.

7. Keep it quiet. Silence is more conducive to sleep. Turn off the radio and TV. Use earplugs or some other source of constant, soothing, background noise to mask sounds you can't ignore, such as a busy street, trains, airplanes or even a snoring partner. Double-pane windows and curtains also muffle outside noise.

8. Make your bed. "A good bed is subjective and different for each person. Make sure you have a bed that is comfortable and offers orthopedic comfort," says Dr. Shepard.

If you share your bed, make sure there's enough room for two. Children and pets are especially disruptive, so you may need to set limits on how often they sleep in your bed with you.

Use your bed only for sleep and sex.

Go to bed when you're tired and turn out the lights. If you don't fall asleep in 30 minutes do something else. Go back to bed when you're tired.

Don't agonize over falling asleep. The stress will only prevent sleep.

9. Soak and sack out. Taking a hot shower or bath before bed helps bring on sleep by can relax tense muscles.

10. Don't rely on sleeping pills. Check with your doctor before using sleeping pills. Doctors generally recommend using sleeping pills for up to four weeks. Make sure the pills won't interact with other medications or with an existing medical condition. If you do take a sleep medication, start at a low dosage gradually when you want to quit.

Use the lowest dosage, and never mix alcohol and sleeping pills.

If you feel sleepy or dizzy during the day, talk to your doctor about changing the dosage or discontinuing the pills.

Determine the quality of your sleep

Insomnia — the inability to get enough sleep — may only last a night or it can last for months, years or even a lifetime. If you have any of the following signs and symptoms, you may not be getting enough sleep:

- You routinely ignore your alarm clock or snatch a few extra minutes to snooze before getting up.
- You look forward to catching up on your sleep on the weekends.
- You have to fight to stay awake during long meetings, in overheated rooms or after a meal.
- You're irritable with co-workers, family and friends.
- You have difficulty concentrating or remembering.
- It takes you more than 30 minutes to fall asleep at night.
- You wake repeatedly throughout the night.
- You wake up groggy and not well rested.
- Your spouse or partner complains about your snoring or fitful sleeping.

Sleep centers

Many hospitals and medical centers operate sleep clinics to diagnose sleep disorders. They are accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. If you have a sleep problem, your doctor may refer you to a sleep center for testing. The results of these tests will be used to identify the condition so that it can be treated appropriately.

