

SLEEP HYGIENE INFORMATION

Sleep is affected by a host of lifestyle factors including diet, exercise and substance use. Below are some guidelines on sleep hygiene which may help promote a good nights sleep.

CAFFEINE

CAFFEINE DISRUPTS SLEEP AND SHOULD BE AVOIDED FOUR TO SIX HOURS BEFORE BEDTIME. Caffeine is a central nervous system stimulant producing fragmented and lighter sleep. Some people are more sensitive to caffeine products than others, but in general it affects everyone, even those who claim it has no impact on their sleep.

Caffeine reaches its maximum concentration in the bloodstream within an hour of intake. It takes three and one-half hours to eliminate half of the caffeine from ones system. Therefore, caffeine consumed one hour prior to bedtime may delay sleep onset and when ingested right at bedtime may interrupt sleep. Caffeine is not only present in coffee. It is also contained in tea, chocolate, several soft drinks (e.g. Pepsi, Coke) and a significant number of over-the-counter medications (e.g. Excedrin).

NICOTINE

NICOTINE DISTURBS SLEEP AND SHOULD BE AVOIDED ESPECIALLY AROUND BEDTIME. Nicotine is also a central nervous system stimulant even though most smokers claim it helps them to relax. Although it would be best to quit altogether, smoking should be reduced especially prior to bedtime. It is also important to avoid smoking when waking up in the middle of the night. If you do, nighttime awakenings may become conditioned to nicotine withdrawal symptoms.

FOOD AND EATING PATTERNS

A LIGHT SNACK AT BEDTIME MAY BE SLEEP PROMOTING. Food intake can be sleep inducing, but the timing and the amount of caloric intake are important factors. Having a light snack prior to bedtime seems to promote sleep though excessive food intake is generally counter-productive. People are sleepier after a high-carbohydrate snack than after one containing high protein. Products that contain milk seem to facilitate sleep. L-tryptophan, a natural amino acid, found in milk and in many other foods seems to promote sleep in some people. So it is fine to have a glass of milk or other non-caffeine beverage with a bowl of cereal or a light sandwich. You should avoid the following foods around bedtime: peanuts, beans, most raw fruits and vegetables (they can cause gas), or high fat snacks such as potato or corn chips, because they keep your digestive system overactive during the night. It is advisable to avoid snacks in the middle of the night because nighttime awakenings may become conditioned to hunger. Excessive fluid intake in the evening may cause nocturia and create sleep interruption problems at night.

EXERCISE

AVOID VIGOROUS EXERCISE WITHIN TWO HOURS OF BEDTIME. It is excellent to exercise regularly. However, the impact of exercise on sleep depends on its timing. Physical exercise in the morning seems to have minimal impact on nighttime sleep[, but regular exercise in late afternoon tends to deepen sleep. If you exercise after dinner time make it light. Just a brisk walk should be beneficial. You should avoid vigorous exercise too close to bedtime because it elevates autonomic activity and may interfere with sleep onset.

ALCOHOL

AVOID ALCOHOL AFTER DINNER SINCE IT USUALLY CAUSES RATHER THAN CURES SLEEP PROBLEMS. Alcohol is the most likely substance to cause sleep disruption. Although a nightcap may help tensed insomniacs to relax and fall asleep, alcohol is a central nervous-system depressant and produces lighter and more fragmented sleep. As people metabolize the alcohol their system experiences withdrawal symptoms which in turn wakes them up in the middle of the night.

SLEEP PILLS

Sleeping pills are effective only temporarily. Research studies have shown that most sleeping aids lose their efficacy within two to four weeks taken nightly. Although highly advertised over-the-counter sleeping aids have little impact on sleep beyond a placebo effect. The short term use of sleeping medication may be indicated in cases of acute and severe insomnia. However, chronic use of sleeping pills produce some of the following side effects: nausea, headaches (hangover), dry mouth, confusional states, reduced daytime alertness and impaired performance. Further, some people feel as groggy in the morning as if they have had no sleep. Tolerance, dependence, and alteration of sleep cycles are additional side effects of sleeping pills. Hypnotics also suppress REM sleep and deep sleep stages (three and four). Therefore, the sleep induced by drugs is lighter and more fragmented. People develop tolerance and habituate to sedative-hypnotic drugs so that larger doses are required to achieve any effect. With an increased dosage people can become dependent and this vicious cycle creates a loss of control over sleep processes. Several withdrawal effects can be experienced upon discontinuation on the medication. Rebound REM effects in the form of nightmares are frequently reported as are longer periods of time required to fall asleep. These can often develop only days or even weeks after sleep medication is discontinued so that people believe that they need the medication because their sleep is worse without it. People need to understand that upon drug withdrawal their sleep will get worse for a short period of time before it begins improving. Elderly people have different sleep patterns and respond to doses one-tenth to one-third the size of those required in the young. Caution is therefore advisable. Because of reduced metabolic functions in older people they take longer than younger people to metabolize drugs. They are, therefore, more at risk for toxic effects of drugs which remain for a longer period of time in their body.