



Good morning! Did you sleep well?

The body rests during sleep, not the brain. The brain remains active, gets recharged, and still controls many body functions including breathing during sleep. Regular, restful sleep is crucial for the body's repair.

When we don't get enough restful sleep, it can affect every part of our lives – our relationships, work performance, safety and health – increasing our risk for depression, life-threatening diseases such as heart disease, cause eye strain and even make us gain weight.

Guidelines for Restful Sleep

Make it a Habit

Maintain your sleep schedule. If at all possible, keep a consistent sleep schedule. Stick to the same sleep hours every day – even on your days off. Align your sleep routine with that of your partner. If it is not possible because one of you works night shift or irregular hours, ask your family to limit phone calls and visitors during sleep hours.

The Lifestyle Solution

Wind down. Slow down. Quiet down. Settle down. Make time to turn off the emotional and intellectual "noise" of the day with a "winding down" ritual – starting two to three hours before bedtime.

Dim the lights around the house (Eskom will love you for this!), read something calm, pray and meditate, listen to relaxing music, and take a warm bath or shower.

Avoid arguments or complicated decisions and set aside activities that stimulate your brain, such as TV and work. If you are anxious, try making a list of any worries, along with a plan to deal with them, to bring closure to your day. Even a 10-minute pre-sleep ritual may help when time is short.

Limit the activity in your bedroom to rest and relaxation. Experts say sleep and lovemaking should be the only pastimes pursued in the bedroom. Don't balance the chequebook, talk on the phone, or watch TV. Everything about the room should be associated with rest and relaxation.

Check the room temperature. Not too hot. Not too cold. Just right!

The best sleep temperature for most people is between 20 – 22 degrees (warmer temperatures promote the growth and spread of viruses and bacteria). It is not recommended to have heaters on all night and you should also turn off your electric blanket once you have warmed up (reduces risk of fire). Sufficient bedding can keep you warm.

Control light. Sunlight is nature's way of stimulating the circadian rhythm (your body clock). Light is the most powerful regulator of the biological clock.

Even if your eyes are closed, any light – especially sunlight – coming into the room tells your brain that it's daytime. Yet your body is exhausted and you're trying to sleep. Use heavy curtains or block-out blinds to shut out light. You could also wear an eye mask.

Turn off TVs, computers, and other blue light producers an hour before sleep. Cover any displays you can't shut off – such as the light from your PC, infrared alarm monitors, battery chargers and mobile phones.

When you need to wake up with a fresh start, step out in bright light for 5 to 30 minutes as soon as you rise.

If you come off a night shift and are headed home to sleep, make it easier for you to fall asleep once you hit the pillow by avoiding bright light on the way home from work. Wear dark, wraparound sunglasses and a hat to shield yourself from sunlight. Don't stop to run errands, tempting as that may be.

Get comfortable. If you wake tired with a stiff neck, it may be that your pillows are too fat or too flat. Your pillow should be just the right size to support your neck in a neutral position. For side sleepers, the nose should align with the centre of the body. Stomach sleeping is best avoided as it twists the neck and strains the lower back.

The comfort of your mattress is vital – a good mattress should be considered as an investment instead of an expense.

Hygiene is important. Vacuum and air your bedding weekly. Sunlight helps to kill off dust mites, and bed bugs hate light. The sneezing, sniffing and itching of allergies can cause fragmented sleep – and your mattress, duvet and pillow may be to blame. Over time, it can fill with mould, dust mite droppings and other allergy triggers.

Neutralise noise. A dripping water tap, a child's cough, or a barking dog can add up to big-time sleep loss. And parents may be hypersensitive to noises in the night long after children outgrow the baby stage. Soothing "white noise" covers up bumps in the night. You can use a fan to create white noise. Ear plugs are an option.

Control pests. You don't want the whine of a mosquito or pitter-patter of rodent feet to disturb your sleep.

Avoid sharing your bed with children or pets. The sleep rhythms are different and space is limited. Any restlessness or disturbance means that no-one gets a sound night's sleep.

Pet care. Make sleep arrangement for your pets – giving them the same consideration as yourself – a predictable routine and a safe, secure and cosy sleeping place, with adequate food and water, and they shouldn't need to wake you.

Set ground rules for household members. Everyone should respect the need for restful sleep and be considerate. Boundaries can be agreed. This includes limiting noise, light and disturbing others when you arrive home late, and calling to check in if you are going to be later than expected so that others are not lying awake anxious about the safety of their loved one.

Safe and sound. For peace of mind, before going to bed, check the security of your property. Ensure that gates and doors are locked and windows secured – it is vital to have fresh air ventilation, so you should find a way of letting in air without compromising your safety. If you have an alarm, arm it.

Check that household appliances (stove, kettle, iron) and heaters are turned off to avoid risk of fire. Especially check that gas bottles are closed tightly so that there is no risk of gas poisoning. Never leave the house without turning off appliances or extinguishing log fires. At the onset of winter, check your gas bottles, heaters and electric blankets before using them.

Manage Your Body Fuel

Cut the nicotine. Need another reason to quit smoking? Nicotine is a stimulant, just like caffeine. Smoking can keep you from falling asleep and worsen insomnia. While you're planning your quit strategy, you may sleep a little better if you smoke fewer cigarettes in the four hours before bed. Make it a rule never to smoke in your bedroom. Not only is it unhealthy but there is also the risk of fire if you doze off and have a lit cigarette.

Control your appetite. How much a person sleeps at night can impact their weight. This is because the amount of sleep a person gets can affect certain hormones, specifically the hormones leptin and ghrelin that govern appetite. These hormones control feelings of hunger and fullness. Ghrelin, which is produced in the gastrointestinal tract, stimulates appetite, while leptin, produced in fat cells, sends a signal to the brain when you are full.

When you don't get enough sleep, it drives leptin levels down, which means you don't feel as satisfied after you eat, and increases ghrelin levels, stimulating your appetite so you want more food. The two combined can set the stage for overeating, which in turn may lead to weight gain. Obesity can cause insomnia.

Avoid heavy foods and big meals late in the day – they put strain on the digestive system, making it hard to get high-quality sleep. Some people do well with a light evening snack of sleep-inducing foods. Complex carbs and dairy foods such as cereal with milk or crackers and cheese fit the bill. Finish any snack at least an hour before bed.

Watch what you drink. Caffeine interferes with the deeper stages of sleep, so even small amounts found in chocolate and decaffeinated coffee may impact your rest. Read labels: Some pain relievers and weight loss pills contain caffeine.

A cup of coffee at the beginning of your workday will help promote alertness. But don't consume caffeine later in the day (especially if you work night shift) or you may have trouble falling asleep when you get home.

Although the tranquilising **effects of alcohol** may make you sleepy at bedtime, beware – after the initial effects wear off, alcohol actually causes more frequent awakenings at night and less restful sleep. Alcohol interrupts the restorative sleep stages. As a muscle-relaxant, alcohol can also worsen sleep-related breathing problems.

Warm milk or chamomile tea is better beverage choices in the evening.

Hydrate your body throughout the day by drinking water (about 1 litre for every 10kg of your body mass). Try not to drink liquids too near to bedtime (within one to two hours of going to sleep). You want to avoid waking up to relieve your bladder.

Manage Your Energy

Avoid naps during the day – especially if you work irregular shifts. If you must nap, keep it to less than 20-minutes. If you feel a nap coming on, call a friend, drink a glass of cold water or go for a short walk.

Exercise regularly. Research shows that exercise helps set cardiac rhythm (heart rate/body clock) which regulates melatonin, the sleep inducing hormone. Exercise has been shown to improve sleep quality, as long as you don't work out too close to bedtime. A post-workout burst of energy can keep you awake. Aim to finish any vigorous exercise 3 to 4 hours before you hit the sack.

Gentle mind/body exercises are fine just before sleep. Yoga, tai chi, and similar routines are a perfect, sleep-inducing nightcap.



The Medical Solution

Relieve back pain. If your sleep is troubled by back pain, you should try not to sleep on your back, but rather on your side with legs bent and a pillow between your legs. If you must sleep on your back, try tucking a pillow under your knees.

Sleeping pills should only be taken if prescribed by your doctor. Sleeping pills may be tempting on those nights when sleep just isn't coming, but be careful. Some sleep medicines can be addictive and may have bothersome side-effects. Ideally, they should be used as a very short-term solution, while other lifestyle and behaviour changes are put in place.

Sleep tips are nice when your insomnia is fleeting – but if your sleeplessness persists for at least a month, it's time to delve deeper into what's going on. Insomnia may be a symptom of an underlying problem. Depression is notorious for causing insomnia, as are other medical conditions, such as acid reflux, asthma and arthritis, and some medications. Chronic insomnia deserves a closer look and evaluation by a doctor.

