

TO SLEEP, OR NOT TO SLEEP

Sleep



You've been dragging yourself out of bed at the crack of dawn to make it to first period for the past 4 years of high school. You may have planned to catch up on your sleep once you got to college.

Once you've settled into your college schedule you will probably start to consider:

- How can you possibly find time to sleep with so much going on?
- How much sleep do you really need?
- What can you do to fall asleep?
- How can you stay asleep?
- How do you get back to sleep when you wake up?
- What do you do if you find yourself sleeping too much?

HOW DO HUMANS SLEEP?

Scientists who research sleep state that we sleep in several 90 minute cycles. Each cycle begins with light sleep, progresses to deeper sleep, goes back to light sleep, and ends with a REM (Rapid Eye Movement) stage. As you most likely remember from high school biology, we dream during the REM stage. Most of our muscles are paralyzed during REM sleep, making it impossible to act out our dreams. REM sleep is crucial for learning and for regulating our moods. So, when we are sleep deprived, our brains have to work harder than when we are well rested.



Getting enough sleep can help you perform better in school and give you better insight. Both Dmitri Mendeleev, creator of the periodic table of elements, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, author of *Kubla Khan* share a common philosophy. Each claim to have written their master works upon awakening after going to bed frustrated and at the end of their creative “rope.” Simply put, they benefited more after they had gotten some much needed sleep.

INSOMNIA

When you can’t fall asleep you are said to have insomnia. Webster’s New World Dictionary defines it as the “abnormal inability to sleep.” Many people experience insomnia at some time in their lives, with the most common cause being change in routine. Insomnia can also be triggered by stress, caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, drugs or medications, illness, or depression.

Getting 6-8 hours less sleep than usual over a week’s time can slow your reaction time, make it more difficult to concentrate and cause depression, irritability, and anxiety. In fact, a study published in *Nature* (January 2004) showed that volunteers taking a simple math test were 3 times more likely to discover a hidden rule for converting the numbers to the right answer if they took the test after sleeping for 8 hours, as compared to the sleep deprived group.

Because you’re constantly using your brain in college, many times exploring and experiencing things for the first time, it’s smart to make sure that you get enough sleep. So, how can you sleep better?

TIPS FOR BETTER SLEEP

- ***It is important to keep the same schedule most of the time.*** This will help to ensure that you’ll fall asleep when you need to and get the right amount of sleep each night. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends, and even if you feel like you didn’t get enough sleep. Contrary to what you may believe, you can’t make up for lost sleep by marathon sleeping on the weekends. Most of us require 6 to 8 hours of sleep each night. Pulling an “all-nighter” may negatively affect your sleep schedule for a week or more.
- ***Follow the same routine before you go to bed each night.*** Brushing your teeth, washing your face, or reading a book before bedtime may all be a part of this routine.



- ***Use your bedroom only for sleep.*** This might be tough when your only living area is your residence hall room. Try to make the bed every morning and turn down the covers only when you're ready to go to sleep. Don't eat, talk on the phone, or watch television when the covers are down.
- ***If your bedroom is not dark and quiet, use a fan to provide some "white noise."*** Some students find ear plugs or eye masks helpful.
- ***Don't lie in bed for more than 30 minutes if you can't fall asleep.*** If you've tried all of the above and still can't fall asleep, get up and go to another room. Sit quietly for 20 minutes, and then go back to bed. Repeat as many times as you need. Don't watch television, as the stimulation will only keep you awake.
- ***Don't worry in bed.*** Schedule a time to worry into your day, perhaps right after dinner. Consider keeping a "worry journal" or a "to do" list.
- ***Don't eat right before going to bed.*** Having undigested food in your stomach could prevent you from falling asleep.
- ***Don't drink excessive amounts of fluid before bedtime.*** Drinking fluid in the evening may result in repeated trips to the bathroom in the wee, wee hours of the morning. However, the tryptophans in a glass of warm milk help release the brain hormone serotonin which affects sleepiness.
- ***Don't drink alcohol just before going to bed.*** Drinking alcohol within 6 hours of bedtime shortens your time spent in deeper stages of sleep. It also causes you to wake up more often during the night.
- ***Stay away from caffeine products in the evenings.*** What do coffee, chocolate, tea, soda and some energy drinks have in common? That's right – caffeine. Drinking caffeine 3-6 hours before bedtime could double the time it takes to fall asleep and quadruple the number of times you wake up during the night.
- ***Avoid nicotine.*** If you're looking for an excuse to quit, here's one: smokers have withdrawal symptoms at night. Most smokers have a harder time falling asleep and have a hard time staying asleep.
- ***Be sure to finish your exercise well before bedtime.*** Daily exercise can shorten the time it takes to fall asleep and improve the quality of your sleep.
- ***Keep your room slightly cool.*** A lower body temperature promotes sleep.



- *Sleep only at night.* If you must nap during the day, limit yourself to 20 minute power naps.
- *Stay away from sleeping pills.* Believe it or not, regular use of sleeping pills can cause rebound insomnia when you stop taking them.

WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

You should schedule an appointment to talk to a health care provider if:

- Sleep problems are interfering with school, work, or your relationships.
- Insomnia lasts more than a week.
- You feel depressed, anxious, are in pain, or have a change in your medications.
- Someone tells you that you snore or stop breathing during the night. Sleep apnea poses several health risks.

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