

Do's and don'ts

Sleep is very much a matter of habit or routine. More often than not, poor sleep results from poor routines, and often people's attempts to solve their sleep problems actually make them worse.

Do talk to your doctor if you suffer from insomnia. Sleep loss may be related to some other medical condition which may be treatable.

Don't reject an offer of sleep medication out of hand. Many GPs offer medication to help people sleep. Such medications have had a bad press in recent years, but although medication is not a long term solution to insomnia, with medical guidance in the selection of the right medicine and its proper use, a short term crisis can be greatly relieved.

Don't use alcohol or 'over the counter' medicines to induce sleep. They may send you to sleep but will also disrupt the normal sleep pattern. You may wake sooner and have greater trouble getting back to sleep.

Do limit the amount of caffeine (tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks) and nicotine you take. These are stimulants and may help keep you awake. It may not be necessary to give them up completely, but rather cut down or cut them out in the evening.

Do keep active during the day. Fit people sleep better than those who are unfit. However, don't exercise near bedtime. Exercise late at night may tire you out but it may also disrupt the normal sleep cycle.

Do try to unwind for at least an hour before bedtime. A busy mind makes it more difficult to sleep.

Do write down any worries that you may have. Spend a set amount of time (say 15-20 minutes) doing this each evening. If you are able to, consider how you might resolve them. Even if you can't resolve your worries, then writing them down can reduce anxiety.

Do practice relaxation exercises during the day and find some short form of relaxation to try at night. Our leaflet Relaxation gives some ideas you can try.

Do go to bed when you feel sleepy - not just because it's a certain time on the clock.

Don't use the bedroom for things apart from sleep (and relaxation.) Don't watch television, complete crosswords or write work reports (for example) in bed. These things may distract you, but they will also stimulate your mind - and a busy mind will keep you awake.

Do turn the light off straight away when you get into bed. Tell yourself that sleep will come when it's ready. Don't 'try hard' to go to sleep - resting in bed can be just as helpful.

Do get up and go to another room if you are not asleep in 25 to 30 minutes. Do something relaxing like reading and go back to bed when you feel sleepy again. Repeat the process if you are not asleep in another 30 minutes.

Do get up at the same time each day - even at weekends. Try not to sleep in the day. This will help you to keep your body clock in a helpful cycle.

Don't take it easy after a bad night's sleep. This might make the day more boring and increase the sense of tiredness. Most people can still do quite a lot after a bad night, and if you do, you may feel better for it - but use common sense.