

BY JULIAN WHITAKER, MD



7 Easy Steps

to the
BEST SLEEP
Ever—
NATURALLY!



7 Easy Steps to the Best Sleep Ever—Naturally!

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1 Avoid Light Exposure

When it comes to promoting sound sleep naturally, the first thing to consider is light in your bedroom. Light exposure during the night disrupts melatonin production and interferes with sleep.

Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland, a tiny structure embedded in the center of the brain that responds to light entering the eyes. Melatonin regulates the circadian rhythms of sleeping and waking, and it also influences daily fluctuations in your body temperature, sense of hunger, energy, and mood.

Research suggests that you don't even have to see light to be affected by it. Therefore, to avoid light's negative effects, do the following:

- ✔ A low-watt nightlight in an adjacent bathroom is acceptable, but all other lights (and the TV, smartphones, tablets, and other LED screens) should be off and the shades should be drawn.
- ✔ If light entering your room from the outside is a problem, consider investing in blackout shades or drapes. Another option is to use a sleep mask.

2 Maintain an Ideal Body Temperature

The second thing that can affect sleep quality is your body temperature. Drops in core temperature signal the brain that it's time to turn in for the night. Therefore, it's not surprising research has shown that keeping your bedroom cool is the ticket to sound sleep. Here are some recommendations on how to maintain an ideal body temperature:

- ✔ Set your thermostat to 65 or 66 degrees and aim for a skin temperature of around 90 degrees.
- ✔ A thin pair of pajamas and a light blanket or sheet should do the trick.

One caveat: Don't get too cold since shivering or being chilled leads to restless sleep.

3 Eliminate Noise

Obviously, everyone sleeps better when it's quiet. If you have a hard time sleeping because of noise disturbances you can't control—such as street noise or a snoring bedmate—then you may want to consider using ear plugs. Another good solution is to use a white noise machine that blocks out other sounds and lulls you into deep, restful sleep.

4 Use Your Bed for Sleeping Only

The truth is you shouldn't use your bed for anything except sleep (and sex). If you spend significant time watching TV, reading, or just loitering in bed, your body may not take the cue that "bed" equals "sleep."

5 Adjust Your Pre-Bedtime Rituals

Almost anything you do in the couple hours before bedtime can affect your ability to go to sleep. Here are a few important things to keep in mind if you want to ensure a night of sound sleep:

- ✔ If you have a habit of going for a brisk walk late in the evening, your body may be so revved up that it takes hours to calm back down and become ready for sleep. So be sure to get your exercise earlier in the day.
- ✔ Similarly, avoid anything that could cause you to feel stressed or overstimulated—mentally or emotionally—in the few hours leading up to bedtime.
- ✔ iPads, mobile phones, computers, and other devices emit blue wavelengths of light that suppress melatonin release. Try to put them away a couple of hours before bedtime.
- ✔ Eating and drinking can also affect your ability to sleep. If you eat right before bed, your stomach

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is still working hard to digest that meal when you are trying to nod off, and it can make sleep elusive. Avoid eating 2–3 hours prior to bedtime. Caffeine and alcohol can also interfere with sleep. If you're especially sensitive to caffeine, you'll want to avoid caffeinated beverages after noon. As for alcohol, one glass might relax you—but any more can make it difficult to fall and stay asleep. The closer to bedtime, the greater the effect.

- ✓ If you're taking any medications, check with your doctor or pharmacist to see if the drugs could be the root of your problem. Sometimes a simple change in dosing time is enough to help you get a good night's sleep.

6 Address Underlying Medical Conditions

There are several medical conditions that can interfere with sleep. Therefore, to ensure sound sleep it's critical you take steps to address them.

The most serious sleep-related medical condition, and one I am intimately familiar with, is sleep apnea. If you snore, chances are you have this problem. Befitting its name (apnea comes from the Greek word meaning "without breath"), obstructive sleep apnea occurs when the fleshy

tissues at the back of the throat relax and block the airway, causing you to stop breathing. The brain, sensing oxygen deprivation, sends signals that wake you enough to take a breath. Fortunately, sleep apnea and snoring are treatable. Often, they can be alleviated with lifestyle measures, and the most effective of these is weight loss.

Other conditions that can make it difficult to get a good night's sleep include restless legs syndrome, benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), anxiety, and depression, to name a few.

7 Take Targeted Supplements for Extra Support

In addition to the lifestyle factors mentioned above, there are targeted nutritional supplements that safely and naturally help promote sound, restful sleep. Ones I recommend include:

- ✓ **Melatonin:** As I explained earlier, melatonin is the "hormone of sleep." Our levels of melatonin naturally decline with age. The good news is melatonin is available in supplement form. Research has demonstrated that supplemental melatonin helps to improve sleep quality by helping you fall asleep faster and increasing the amount of uninterrupted sleep.

The suggested dose of melatonin is 1–6 mg (average 3 mg) taken 30–60 minutes before bedtime.

- ✓ **Valerian root (*Valeriana officinalis*):** This calming herb has been used since the 1800s to help promote sleep and ease frazzled nerves. The root contains up to 150 different compounds including valerenic acid, which research suggests may be responsible for its sleep-inducing and calming effects. The suggested dose is 500 mg before bedtime.
- ✓ **L-theanine:** This amino acid found in green tea has been shown to increase alpha-wave activity in the brain, which calms the mind and promotes a relaxed, restful state. The suggested dose of L-theanine is 200 mg before bedtime.
- ✓ **GABA, lemon balm, chamomile, and hops** are other supplements to consider since they help reduce stress and promote mental relaxation.

Look for all of these as standalone supplements or in combination sleep formulas. Research has shown that these supplements, together with the lifestyle factors described above, provide noticeable benefits as early as the first night they are taken.

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