



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: SLEEP HYGIENE

The Student Health Provider has recommended you improve your sleep hygiene.

Are you having trouble with sleep? Chances are you can alleviate this problem by evaluating your sleep habits, or “Sleep Hygiene”. You can make a significant improvement with your sleep IF YOU FOLLOW THE RULES! Many people do not want to change the way they do things, they just want a “pill” to take care of the problem. Unfortunately, medication for sleep problems in general can only be a temporary fix, and then it’s back to you again. So why not figure it out right from the very beginning? Most of the information about Sleep Hygiene in this article is adapted from Phoenix CPAP Services, Inc. available on the web.

Rule #1: Stay away from stimulants! That includes caffeinated coffee, non-herbal tea, caffeinated soft drinks, chocolate, and many prescription and non-prescription drugs. A little bit of the above during the day may be OK, but heavy regular daytime use can still mess things up for the night time. In any case, take absolutely no stimulants within 4 hours of going to bed.

Rule #2: In case you haven’t heard, **nicotine is bad for you**, and by the way, bad for your sleep! QUIT! Easier said than done of course, but at least do not smoke, chew, etc. near bedtime or during the night. If you do actually quit smoking, you may experience withdrawal symptoms that may disturb your sleep but that will only be temporary, then sleep will come much easier!

Rule #3: Beware of the “nightcap”! Alcohol can help people fall asleep, but can have a tendency to disrupt sleep later in the night. Alcohol can also lead to early morning headaches, and nightmares. Avoid alcohol 6 hours before bedtime.

Rule #4: Exercise! Regular exercise in particular helps sleep, and seems to help more if you are physically fit. Exercise however in the morning, itself, might not help sleep at night or exercise near bedtime; however exercise about six hours before bedtime has been shown to help lead to a good night’s rest. The converse can also be true: that limited activity during the day can contribute to insomnia.

Rule #5: Be sure you have an environment conducive for sleep! Is your bed comfortable? Generally, a firmer bed is more conducive to good sleep than a softer bed. Light tends to disturb sleep, so heavy shades or curtains will help, and avoid bright night lights, lava lights, etc. You can try eye patches to block out light, but they may be a bit uncomfortable for some, and fall off during sleep. If you need some light to see your way to the bathroom, then a small nightlight in the bathroom with the door open may work. Noise tends to disturb sleep, so you may have to make clear to the night owls that they must be quiet, close your windows if necessary, or mask unavoidable sounds (snoring partner) with a sound (“white noise”) machine. You can try earplugs, but they tend to be uncomfortable. Also, loud aggressive music, a book or TV program that keeps you on the edge of your seat, or very “active” conversation can also make it hard to go to sleep, and best avoided before bedtime.

Rule #6: Eat lightly before sleep! Food takes awhile to digest, so after a heavy meal lots of food sits in your stomach for awhile. When you are upright and walking around, gravity and movement are one your side to help promote passage of food through the intestines and stomach. Lying down, it takes longer for the food to clear, and thus sits there much longer. The presence of food in the stomach stimulates the



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stomach to secrete acid into the stomach to help digest the food. Although the food helps to buffer the acid, since things are not moving very fast, the acid sits around too. The other effect of a lot of food sitting in the stomach is increased pressure on the stomach wall because it is filled with food. This can cause the trap door (“lower esophageal sphincter”) between the food tube (“esophagus”) and the stomach to not close properly which allows the stomach acid sitting around to trickle into the esophagus. This can cause restlessness (just vague stomach discomfort), heart burn (from acid in the esophagus), nasty bitter taste in the mouth and foul breath (from acid getting into the mouth) and a constant irritating cough (from acid making its way into the voice box area [larynx]), and even into the lungs. Some food types (hot, spicy, fatty, and acidic) can promote indigestion in people, even in small quantities, so they should be avoided too close to bedtime. However, a light snack at bedtime, particularly involving milk or milk products, seems to help promote sleep.

Rule #7: Don’t be worry, be happy! In other words, try to reduce stress because stress gets implicated in everything bad with the body, including insomnia. When under stress, we tend to do things that, at least temporarily, seem to help reduce stress: naps, excessive caffeine, alcohol at bedtime, working at night, smoking, and irregular sleep times, to name just a few. The problem is those same things tend to lead to problems with sleep, long after the stressful situation has abated. In the mean time, “going to bed” is frequently met with failure and frustration, so that the bedroom becomes associated with tension and anxiety rather than restful sleep. Many end up sleeping (poorly) in a chair or couch gets pretty complicated, and therapy by a trained professional can help. There are techniques available that can help reverse the “conditioning” that has occurred such as: relaxation exercises, meditation, biofeedback, and hypnosis. Of course, talking with close friends, exercise, and long walks with nature (on the beach or a wooded trail for instance) can go a long way to help reduce ongoing stress.

Rule #8: Don’t be a clock watcher! You may go to bed with the alarm clock close by, its illuminated face staring at you as if taunting you. Every few minutes you may look at the clock to see if you may have missed a few hours, only to notice a few minutes went by. Set the alarm for when you want to awaken in the morning and hide it so you can’t see it (an open dresser drawer can work nicely).

Rule #9: Take control and schedule a time to worry! This is called “designated worrying time”. The problem is that going to bed while worrying about things can make it difficult to go to sleep and stay asleep. The idea here is to designate a specific time every day to “worrying” (in a helpful and constructive way, i.e. used to sort out problems and come up with possible solutions), and then you are off the hook! Here is how it works: Choose a time every evening to sit down for 30 minutes alone and undisturbed. Think about the things you are worried about and write them down, one worry each, on 3x5 cards. It doesn’t matter whether the worry is “important enough” or not. If it worries you, it is priority, and high priority. Now go through each card and write down possible solutions to the worry on the same card. After that, forget about the worries, you’re done for the night! The next morning, review your cards and get to work carrying out the possible solutions you came up with the previous night, focusing on the high priority pile first.

If you have tried all these suggestions for several weeks with no meaningful improvement, then see your doctor or visit the Student Health Center for an evaluation. Above all, have hope, don’t give up, believe in yourself, and use professionals when needed. **Build the foundations, and sleep will come!**