



Sleep is far too underrated in our culture and so much about our modern lifestyles sets us up for poor sleep. But sleep is so incredibly important for our health – it's when we heal and recover and when our brain detoxifies and stores newly learnt things into memory. It impacts our immune system, cognition, memory, mood, mental health, blood pressure, metabolism, hormonal health, cardiovascular health... it also just helps us to have the capacity to work on the other areas of health that we need to work on.

So how much sleep do we need? The National Sleep Foundation recommends between 7-9 hours per night for healthy adults. Additionally being in bed by 10pm allows for the best healing and recovery.

Clearly sleep needs to be a health priority. There are many factors that can affect our sleep but the first place to start is what's known as "sleep hygiene". Sleep hygiene is about healthy habits, behaviours and environmental factors that are conducive to sleeping well on a regular basis.

Sleep hygiene tips:

- **Work with the light** – Production of melatonin (our main sleep inducing hormone) is closely tied to light. In response to darkness, the pineal gland in the brain produces melatonin and exposure to light slows or halts that production. Going outside and getting your face in the sun first thing in the morning as well as dimming lights and turning off screens (TV, phone, laptop...) at least half an hour before going to bed helps to set this day/night light clock. The light from screens stop your brain from producing melatonin so it is recommended that you turn off screens. And if you get up during the night to go to the toilet, try to do so without turning lights on – the light signals to your brain that the sun has come up, and can make it difficult to fall back asleep.
- **Aim to get to bed and wake up at the same time each day** - Daily cycles of melatonin production also normalise our circadian rhythm, reinforcing a sleep-wake schedule and going to bed and getting up at the same time each day helps your body get into a routine.
- **Keep your bedroom for sleep and sex, and try to keep it uncluttered** - Our brain associates our environment with activities and habits. It is important to use your bedroom only for sleeping and sex (eg. don't have a TV in your bedroom); that way when you go to bed you are signalling to your brain that it is time to sleep. Also try to keep your bedroom clean and uncluttered. Interestingly we sleep better in an uncluttered space.
- **Your bedroom should also be dark, cool and quiet** - The best temperature for sleeping is between 18-20 degrees – we're actually designed to have a cooler body

temperature during sleep than during the day. As bedtime approaches, your body temperature starts to fall and the drop in temperature which is associated with sleepiness. Being too hot or having the bedroom temperature too high can prevent restorative sleep.

- **Exercise during the day** - Exercise during the day can help you sleep better at night but exercise at night can keep you awake.
- **Watch what you eat and drink.** Caffeine after lunch can keep you awake; and while alcohol in the evening might make you feel sleepy - it actually compromises the quality of sleep.
- **Develop a good sleep ritual.** Your brain recognises cues and signals that it's bedtime and will start to prepare to sleep. So think about your bedtime habits and have a good bedtime routine.
- **Have a hot Epsom salt bath** – research has found that having a hot bath 1-2 hours before going to bed can help you get to sleep as it raises your body temperature, causing you to feel sleepy as your temperature drops again.
- **Don't lie in bed awake** – if you still can't get to sleep it's best not to lie in bed awake for too long a period and get stressed about not sleeping. We generally say if you haven't fallen asleep in around 20-30 minutes, then get up, do something boring or calming (with the lights dim) until you feel sleepy and try again.

Your bedtime routine might look something like this:

1. Turn off all screens at least half an hour before you're wanting to go to bed.
2. Have a strong cup of herbal tea such as chamomile or lavender (a little plug here - both my "Sleep" and "Calm" blends have beautiful herbs to support sleep) - but other commercial varieties work well too ☺.
3. Brush your teeth.
4. Dim the lights and do something quite and not overly stimulating like reading (unless it's a thriller which might be quite stimulating), art, puzzling, colouring, journaling or stretching.
5. Pay attention to sleep signals. Melatonin comes in waves of around 70-90 minutes, so when the sleepiness cycle comes around, you can just head to the toilet one last time and hop into bed – all primed and ready to sleep.

As you implement good sleep hygiene routines, your body should begin to recognise the cues, making falling asleep easier, and improve your sleep quality. Give yourself time though – don't expect overnight results – it might take weeks for your body to adjust. Also don't try and make it too dramatic. If for example you're used to going to bed at midnight – then bringing it straight back to 10pm might be a bit too much of a jump. Try making it 15-30 minutes earlier each week until you get back to the desired time. Small increments are generally more effective.