

The Complete Guide to Sleep Hygiene

Evidence-Based Strategies for Deeper, Restorative Sleep

Poor sleep is one of the most underrated threats to health, mood, and performance. This guide distills the latest sleep science into practical, actionable habits you can start tonight.

WHAT'S INSIDE:

- * What is Sleep Hygiene & Why It Matters
- * The Science of Sleep Cycles
- * Your 10 Golden Sleep Hygiene Rules
- * The Perfect Bedtime Wind-Down Routine
- * Sleep-Friendly Nutrition & Supplements
- * Managing Stress, Screens & Your Bedroom Environment

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WHAT IS SLEEP HYGIENE AND WHY IT MATTERS

Sleep hygiene refers to a set of behavioural practices and environmental conditions that promote consistent, high-quality sleep. The term was coined by sleep researcher Peter Hauri in 1977 and has since become a cornerstone of sleep medicine worldwide.

Just as dental hygiene protects your teeth, sleep hygiene protects your mind and body. Poor sleep hygiene is one of the most common — and most correctable — causes of insomnia and chronic daytime fatigue.

1 in 3

Adults have poor sleep

7-9 hrs

Recommended nightly

90 min

One sleep cycle

4-6

Cycles per night

"Sleep is not a luxury. It is a non-negotiable biological necessity." - Dr. Matthew Walker, Sleep Scientist

THE SCIENCE OF SLEEP: HOW YOUR BRAIN RESTS AND REPAIRS

Every night your brain cycles through two fundamental sleep states:

NREM Sleep (Non-Rapid Eye Movement)

- * Stage 1 - Light Sleep: The transition from wakefulness. Easily disrupted. Lasts 1-5 minutes.
- * Stage 2 - Core Sleep: Heart rate slows, sleep spindles appear. Crucial for memory. ~50% of total sleep.
- * Stage 3 - Deep Sleep: Most physically restorative. Growth hormone released, tissues repair, immune system strengthens, and the brain clears waste via the glymphatic system.

REM Sleep (Rapid Eye Movement)

- * Occurs approximately 90 minutes after sleep onset and lengthens with each cycle.
- * Vital for emotional regulation, creativity, and long-term memory consolidation.
- * Dreams primarily occur here. Brain activity is nearly as high as during wakefulness.

Each full sleep cycle lasts ~90 minutes. To wake truly refreshed, aim for 5 complete cycles (approximately 7.5 hours).

THE TWO BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THAT CONTROL YOUR SLEEP

1. The Circadian Rhythm

Your 24-hour internal clock, located in the hypothalamus, controls the timing of sleepiness and alertness across the day. It is primarily synchronised by light: morning bright light suppresses melatonin and boosts alertness; fading evening light triggers melatonin release and sleepiness.

2. Adenosine Sleep Pressure

Adenosine accumulates in the brain throughout the day and creates increasing "sleep pressure". The longer you stay awake, the stronger the drive to sleep. Caffeine temporarily blocks adenosine receptors, masking fatigue — but the underlying sleep debt remains and must eventually be repaid.

KEY INSIGHT: Both systems must be aligned. Irregular schedules, late-night light, and excessive caffeine disrupt both — creating the perfect storm for insomnia.

YOUR 10 GOLDEN SLEEP HYGIENE RULES

The following evidence-based practices are endorsed by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) as the gold standard of sleep hygiene:

1

Keep a Consistent Sleep Schedule — Every Single Day

Go to bed and wake up at exactly the same time daily — including weekends. This is the single most powerful sleep hygiene habit. Consistency anchors your circadian rhythm and makes falling asleep dramatically easier. Even one late night can create "social jet lag" that takes days to recover from.

2

Make Your Bed a Sleep-Only Sanctuary

Use your bed exclusively for sleep and intimacy. Working, watching TV, or scrolling your phone in bed trains your brain to associate it with wakefulness. Strong stimulus control means that the moment you lie down, your brain begins preparing for sleep.

3

Eliminate Blue Light 60-90 Minutes Before Bed

Screens emit blue light (~480 nm wavelength) that suppresses melatonin by up to 50%, delaying sleep onset. Enable Night Mode or use blue-light-blocking glasses if screen use is unavoidable. Better still — replace screen time with reading, journaling, or gentle stretching.

4

Optimise Your Bedroom Environment

Temperature: Keep it cool at 18-20 degrees C. A falling core body temperature is a key trigger for sleep onset. Darkness: Use blackout curtains or a sleep mask. Light suppresses melatonin even at low levels. Sound: Use earplugs or white noise if needed. Keep your bedroom calm, tidy, and associated with rest.

5

Cut Caffeine After 2 PM

Caffeine has a half-life of 5-7 hours — half of a 3 PM coffee is still in your bloodstream at 9 PM. It delays sleep onset and reduces deep NREM sleep even when you feel like you fall asleep normally. Sources: coffee, black and green tea, energy drinks, cola, chocolate, and some medications.

6

Understand the Truth About Alcohol and Sleep

Alcohol helps you fall asleep faster (sedative effect) but fragments sleep in the second half of the night by suppressing REM sleep and increasing arousals. The result: more time in bed but less restorative sleep. Allow at least 3 hours between your last drink and bedtime.

7

Exercise Regularly — But Time It Right

Regular aerobic exercise is one of the most effective non-drug treatments for insomnia, increasing deep sleep and reducing sleep latency. However, vigorous exercise within 2 hours of bedtime raises core temperature and adrenaline, which can delay sleep. Morning or afternoon exercise is ideal.

8

Build a 30-60 Minute Wind-Down Routine

Your nervous system needs a deliberate transition from the alert daytime state to the calm state needed for sleep. Dim the lights, take a warm bath (the subsequent temperature drop triggers sleepiness), read a physical book, do gentle stretching, and practise breathing exercises or sleep meditation.

9

Manage a Racing Mind Proactively

Cognitive hyperarousal — overthinking at bedtime — is the #1 reason people lie awake. Strategies: Keep a worry journal before bed to "offload" concerns. Schedule 20 minutes of "worry time" earlier in the evening. Use 4-7-8 breathing (inhale 4 sec, hold 7 sec, exhale 8 sec). Try progressive muscle relaxation or mindfulness meditation.

10

Get Out of Bed If You Cannot Sleep

If you have been awake for more than 20 minutes, get up and do a quiet, non-stimulating activity in dim light until you feel genuinely sleepy. This prevents the bed from becoming associated with frustration — a core principle of Stimulus Control Therapy from CBT-I.

THE PERFECT BEDTIME WIND-DOWN ROUTINE

Structure your final 60 minutes before bed as a consistent routine. With repetition, this sequence becomes a powerful sleep trigger:

60 min before bed

Dim all lights. Close work apps and emails. Switch off overhead lighting.

50 min before bed	Warm bath or shower (10-15 min). The body temperature drop afterwards accelerates sleep onset.
40 min before bed	Light, enjoyable reading — a physical book is ideal.
30 min before bed	Gentle yoga, stretching, or progressive muscle relaxation for 10 minutes.
20 min before bed	Write your brain dump: tomorrow's to-do list, any worries, 3 things you are grateful for.
10 min before bed	4-7-8 breathing (4 cycles). Mindfulness body scan or sleep meditation.
Lights out	Bedroom cool, dark, and quiet. Phone on Do Not Disturb in another room.

SLEEP-FRIENDLY NUTRITION AND SUPPLEMENTS

Foods and Drinks That Promote Sleep

- * Tart cherry juice: Natural melatonin source shown to increase sleep duration by up to 84 minutes in clinical studies.
- * Kiwi fruit: Linked to improved sleep onset and duration — rich in serotonin, antioxidants, and folate.
- * Fatty fish (salmon, mackerel): High in vitamin D and omega-3s which regulate serotonin.
- * Warm milk: Contains tryptophan (melatonin precursor) and calcium which aids conversion.
- * Almonds and walnuts: Good sources of melatonin and magnesium.
- * Chamomile, passionflower, and valerian tea: Mild GABA-modulating properties promote relaxation.

Foods and Drinks to Avoid

- * Caffeine after 2 PM: Coffee, black/green tea, energy drinks, cola, dark chocolate.
- * Alcohol within 3 hours of bed: Fragments REM sleep and increases night-time awakenings.
- * High-sugar foods at night: Cause blood sugar spikes and crashes that disrupt sleep.
- * Large heavy evening meals: Allow 2-3 hours between dinner and bed for digestion.

Evidence-Based Supplements (Always Consult Your Doctor First)

> Melatonin (0.5-5 mg)

Most effective for circadian rhythm disruption, jet lag, shift work. Take 30-60 minutes before bed.

> Magnesium Glycinate (200-400 mg)

Supports GABA activity and muscle relaxation. Deficiency strongly linked to poor sleep.

> L-Theanine (100-200 mg)

Amino acid from green tea that promotes calm alpha brain waves and reduces sleep latency.

> **Valerian Root (300-600 mg)**

May increase GABA levels. Take 30-60 min before bed. Allow 2-4 weeks for full effect.

> **Ashwagandha (300-600 mg)**

Adaptogen that reduces cortisol and helps stress-related insomnia. Take with evening meal.

MANAGING STRESS, ANXIETY AND A RACING MIND

4-7-8 Breathing Technique

Inhale quietly through your nose for 4 counts. Hold your breath for 7 counts. Exhale completely through your mouth for 8 counts. Repeat 4 cycles. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system, lowers heart rate, and reduces anxiety within minutes.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Starting at the feet and working upward, tense each muscle group for 5 seconds, then release for 20 seconds. This physical tension-release cycle communicates safety to the nervous system and reduces somatic arousal — the bodily tension that keeps you awake.

Mindfulness and Body Scan Meditation

Direct gentle, non-judgemental attention to each part of the body in turn. Rather than fighting thoughts, mindfulness trains you to observe them without reactivity — breaking the cognitive loop of worry. Even 10 minutes of daily mindfulness has been shown to significantly improve sleep quality.

Cognitive Restructuring (CBT-I Technique)

Challenge unhelpful sleep thoughts like "I will be useless tomorrow if I don't get 8 hours." Replace catastrophic thinking with realistic alternatives: "My body knows how to sleep. One imperfect night will not ruin me." Reducing sleep anxiety directly reduces pre-sleep arousal.

REMEMBER: Trying harder to sleep makes it harder to sleep. The goal is not to force sleep — it is to create the conditions in which sleep can arise naturally.

SLEEP HYGIENE QUICK-REFERENCE CARD

DO THIS	AVOID THIS
✓ Consistent bed and wake times daily	✗ Irregular or shifting sleep schedule
✓ Dark, cool bedroom (18-20 degrees C)	✗ Bright lights and warm room at night
✓ Screen-free last 60-90 minutes	✗ Phone or tablet in bed
✓ Herbal tea or warm milk in evening	✗ Caffeine after 2 PM
✓ Exercise before 6 PM	✗ Vigorous exercise within 2 hrs of bed
✓ Wind-down routine (bath, reading)	✗ Work or stressful activities at night
✓ White noise or earplugs if noisy	✗ Sleeping with TV on
✓ Get up if awake more than 20 min	✗ Lying in bed tossing and turning
✓ Short nap under 20 min before 3 PM	✗ Long naps or napping after 3 PM
✓ Write tomorrow's to-do list early	✗ Planning and worrying in bed

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Sleep hygiene is the essential foundation — but if insomnia persists beyond 4 weeks despite consistent effort, professional evaluation is important. Please consult a sleep specialist or psychiatrist if you experience:

- * Chronic inability to fall or stay asleep (3+ nights per week for 3+ months)
- * Loud snoring, gasping for air, or witnessed breathing pauses during sleep (possible sleep apnea)
- * Restless uncomfortable sensations in the legs that worsen at rest (possible restless legs syndrome)
- * Excessive daytime sleepiness despite adequate time in bed
- * Reliance on sleeping pills, alcohol, or cannabis to fall asleep
- * Insomnia linked to anxiety, depression, PTSD, or chronic pain

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Comprehensive evaluation and personalised treatment for insomnia and all sleep disorders.

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