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How to improve your sleep behaviour

Are you getting enough sleep? Sleep is important for our well-being and a lack of shut-eye can affect everything from performance at work to immune function. As four in ten of us aren't getting enough sleep, we explore the best ways to improve sleep behaviour.

While medical disorders such as [sleep apnoea](#) or chronic [insomnia](#) may need professional investigation, for many of us our lack of sleep is lifestyle related. According to the [Royal Society for Public Health \(RSPH\)](#), "new parents, commuters, shift-workers, party animals and young people," are all at risk of sleep-deprivation.

Experts recommend we [set regular hours for sleep](#), and aim to get seven or eight hours a night to function at our best. However, in reality, if we have young children, work shifts, or other unalterable interruptions during the night, this might not be possible.

But, whilst we can't always change the quantity of sleep we have, there are many natural ways to improve our sleep quality and make the most of our rest.

Tune in to your rhythm

When trying to maximise the benefits of sleep, it's important to understand your body's natural rhythms and work with them. [Gemma Clare](#), holistic health specialist, explains: "We sleep in 90-minute cycles. If you stay in line with this natural timing, you can feel more rested, even if you aren't getting quite as much as you need."

By dividing your night into 90-minute blocks, you can avoid being woken in the middle of a sleep-cycle, and allow your body to wake up more naturally. "The optimum amount might be six 90-minute cycles," says Clare. "But if you break after four or five, you will feel more rested than if you continue to sleep and wake up in the middle of a cycle."

Sound complicated? There's an app for that. "There are lots of helpful tools – such as the [Sleepytime](#) sleep scheduler app on [Apple](#) and [android](#) – that help you to plan your bedtime and the best time to wake, based on the time available," adds Clare.

Focus on quality

Even if you're not getting enough shut-eye, it's important to make the most of the sleep you have. This is called improving the quality of your rest.

Sleep apnoea specialist Dr. Magid Katz says: "Most people don't think about what happens while they are sleeping. Many wake up periodically during the night without even knowing it. These are called mini-arousals and they can be worsened by poor sleeping position. You might think you got a full night's sleep, but may still be tired."

To optimise your sleep, Katz recommends you consider the [quality of your mattress](#) and bedding. "If you're waking up in pain, it might be an indication that your back isn't being properly supported by your mattress," she explains. "Or if you suffer from allergies, you may wish to consider hypoallergenic bedding."

Improve your sleep environment

It's also important to ensure your bedroom promotes good sleep. "Make sure your bedroom is tidy," says Clare. "Messy rooms [can affect your sleep](#) even if you're not aware of it consciously."

In addition, it's important to [keep your bedroom solely for sleep](#) and other bedtime activities. This will give your subconscious a clear indication that it's time for rest.

Light pollution

Light pollution disrupts your body's natural rhythms, so it's crucial you minimise excess light in the bedroom. Try investing in blackout blinds or a sleep mask to cut down on unnecessary stimulation.

Exposure to [blue light](#) from electronic screens can also disrupt your sleep – even after you've switched your phone off for the night. Optometrist and sleep expert Dhruvin Patel from [Ocushield](#) says: "Screens impact your sleep due to harmful blue light emitted from the digital device itself. This light disturbs a hormone called melatonin which is responsible for telling your body it's time to sleep."

To ensure your body is ready for rest, it's important to be mindful of your use of technology. "Reducing the amount of screen time directly before you plan to fall asleep, critically in the hour before the run up to bedtime should help. You can also reduce the brightness of screens by using blue-light software or filtering products," explains Patel.

Help your body to switch off

In today's busy world, it's easy to feel stressed. Your body may well hold onto that tension, making it difficult to switch off. There are many ways in which you can help your muscles to relax, from [meditation](#) to taking a warm bath.

Essential oils such as lavender and ylang ylang are also said to promote relaxation and rest. Try adding a few drops to some distilled water and spritzing your sheets, or add a few drops to your evening bath.

What about medication?

Whilst medication has its place, all [sleeping tablets](#) carry a risk of serious side effects, including addiction, in the medium-long term. It's always more beneficial to seek a natural solution to tiredness or poor quality sleep.

"Medication can sometimes mask an issue rather than solve it," says Clare: "There is often a natural solution," the holistic health specialist adds.

However, if you suspect you have a sleep disorder, it may be worth discussing further intervention. Katz says: "If all else fails, or you suspect you have a more serious problem, see your doctor." According to the sleep apnoea specialist, you may benefit from medication or an appliance that can improve your sleep and make you healthier."

Making the most of rest

Whilst you might not be able to stop the baby crying, or ignore the urgent call, but by carrying out a few simple tweaks you can make the most of your sleep - and feel more rested as a result.

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