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## How to fix your sleep schedule with a healthy bedtime routine

A good sleep schedule ensures you're getting the right amount of shuteye each night and helps you to prevent building up a 'sleep debt' that leaves you not feeling at your best. What makes a good sleep schedule, and how does a healthy bedtime routine help you to adopt one?

### Why is a sleep schedule so important?

We all know that [sleep is important](#). As you sleep, your body repairs and restores itself, and your brain consolidates new memories and retains useful information.

But what's the perfect amount of sleep? We've all experienced the short-term effects of sleep deprivation, from slower reactions and 'brain fog' to irritability and low mood. Thanks to a wealth of research, many of us have also heard that long-term lack of sleep is associated with poor heart health and poor mental health<sup>1</sup>.

Yet, it appears too much sleep is also linked to health issues. According to the Sleep Foundation, people who 'oversleep' or 'undersleep' are more likely to be [obese](#), [suffer with mental distress](#), and experience conditions such as [coronary heart disease](#), [stroke](#), and [diabetes](#)<sup>2</sup>.

### What is a good sleep schedule?

A good sleep schedule or bedtime routine helps you get the right amount of shuteye. [UKCP](#) psychotherapist Heather Darwall-Smith explains: "On average, adults need 7-9 hours of sleep a night. Making sure you have enough time to get the sleep you need is the first step to improving sleep."

#### Your body clock

"Every cell in our body has a biological clock which keeps near perfect time as it is aligned with the approximately 24-hour cycle of light and dark. Known as circadian rhythms, this tells our bodies when to eat, sleep or reproduce.

This timing is biological and is fundamental to managing how much sleep we need as well as the timing. It aligns with a second process - sleep pressure - which needs to be high to make us sleepy, and together they create a sleep window which is our ideal time to sleep.

Adopting a sleep schedule that wakes you up at the same time each day is one effective way of keeping your internal clock on track.

## **What's your sleep debt?**

According to Darwall-Smith, lots of us carry a huge 'sleep debt', meaning we're functioning on less sleep than we need to feel at our best. The tricky thing is, this doesn't always mean our lights are out before heads hit pillows each night; we can still struggle to fall asleep, get back to sleep, or find ourselves waking too early.

**Darwall-Smith says:**

**A typical sleep pattern that is easily fixed looks like this:**

- **Monday–Thursday:** bedtime 12.00 pm, fall asleep around 1 am having been on phone, up at 7 am.
- **Friday–Saturday:** bedtime 1–2 am, up at 9 am.
- **Sunday:** bedtime 9 pm but can't get to sleep, up at 7 am.

**The potential issues here are as follows:**

- **Monday–Thursday:** getting approximately six hours of sleep a night but in need of 7.5 hours. This creates a sleep debt of six hours over the four days.
- **Friday–Saturday:** a late night and a lie-in results in seven to eight hours sleep. This will pay off the sleep debt, right? No, a sleep debt has to be paid off slowly. You can't recoup what you have missed by lying in. For many people, the late nights also include alcohol, which disrupts sleep quality, so the debt remains.
- **Sunday night:** an attempt to get more sleep means you go to bed early. However, there might not be enough sleep pressure, so despite being tired, you're not sleepy enough to fall asleep – you are trying to work against your biological sleep process.
- **Monday morning:** you're waking up a couple of hours earlier than the previous two days. It's like giving yourself jetlag – the circadian rhythm is misaligned, and you feel terrible.

Is this predicament familiar? Darwall-Smith describes this as a combination of social jetlag and sleep debt.

"This can be sorted by instigating a consistent wake time – give or take 15 minutes – even if you've had a late night the previous evening. Allow yourself the time you need to get enough sleep but don't try to get too much – this won't work."

# Tips for correcting a poor sleep schedule

Resetting your sleep schedule may sound straightforward on paper, but creating a new, healthy bedtime routine can be tricky, especially when we want to adjust the time of evening we start feeling sleepy.

This is why it's important to address any 'poor sleep hygiene' habits - activities that can seriously affect our ability to fall asleep. Darwall-Smith has some tips on forming healthy sleep habits:

- **Understand the importance of consistency but don't become obsessive** - good sleep is an averaging out of a positive sleep routine and the right amount of sleep versus not perfect sleep. It's not possible to get a perfect night's sleep every night.
- **Dim or turn off the lights near bedtime** - your brain is expecting darkness, so bright light exposure during night-time confuses your circadian rhythms and reduces melatonin production, which can make it hard to fall asleep or reduce sleep quality.
- **Don't eat too late** - eating within three hours of your bedtime routine is associated with disturbed sleep<sup>3</sup> as it confuses your internal clock and inhibits digestion of food.
- **Address your stress** - cortisol, the stress hormone, can keep you awake. Darwall-Smith advises allowing time for regular rest and relaxation in your day.
- **Exercise during the day** - moving more will help increase your sleep pressure but be mindful of exercise too close to bedtime. Your body needs to cool down to help you sleep and an intense session is also likely to spike your stress hormones. Experts recommend a minimum 1- to 2-hour gap before bed<sup>4</sup>.

## Can an 'all-nighter' fix your sleep schedule?

Different methods work for different people, but Darwall-Smith says that it takes time for your biological clock to come back into sync. She also cautions that resisting sleep for one whole night puts you at high risk of drowsy driving or lapsed attention. "If pulling an all-nighter, don't drive, operate machinery, or make significant decisions. It is likely to take a couple of days to recover."

## How long does it take to get used to a new sleep schedule?

This can take around two weeks, in Darwall-Smith's experience. It's important to trust that your internal clock will adapt, which will gradually make your new bedtime routine and schedule a lot easier, and eventually become second nature.

## Further reading

1. [Sleep Foundation, Insomnia.](#)
2. [Sleep Foundation, Oversleeping.](#)
3. [Chung et al. Does the proximity of meals to bedtime influence the sleep of young adults? A cross-sectional survey of university students.](#)
4. [Sleep Cycle, Exercise and sleep: how workouts work for your sleep.](#)
5. [The sleep Doctor, Cortisol and sleep.](#)

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