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LIFE & WORK | HEALTH & WELLNESS

To Get a Better Night's Sleep, First Fix Your Day

Here are the smartest strategies to finally get your sleep back on track

By [Andrea Petersen](#) [Follow](#)

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For many of us, the pandemic's anxious days have led to sleepless nights. But there are [ways to get our nights back on track](#)—by changing what we do during the day.

More than half of Americans said they had experienced more sleep disturbances [during the pandemic](#), according to a March 2021 survey of more than 2,000 adults commissioned by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. About 57% said they had more trouble falling or staying asleep; 46% slept less at night and 36% said they had more disturbing dreams.

“The stress and isolation of the pandemic, the reduction in physical activity, none of those are good for sleep,” says Daniel J. Buysse, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Chronic insufficient sleep [has been linked to health problems](#) including diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. Cognitive functions such as attention and reaction time also are compromised when we don't sleep enough. Mood lowers.

How well you sleep at night depends on what you do during the day, sleep-medicine experts say. They generally recommend that healthy adults get between seven and nine hours of sleep a night. And there are steps you can take to make a restful night much more likely.

Wake up the right way

A good night's sleep starts with having a regular wake-up time that doesn't vary by more than an hour, even on the weekend, says Fariha Abbasi-Feinberg, medical director of sleep medicine at Millennium Physician Group in Fort Myers, Fla.

Anything more than that is "going to mess with your circadian rhythm," she says, referring to the 24-hour cycle of physical and mental changes.

Get bright light in the morning as soon as you can, which tells your body it is time to wake up and suppresses the sleep-promoting hormone melatonin, she says. It is even better if you can do it outside. If enough natural light isn't available when you wake up, Dr. Buysse suggests using a full-spectrum light box or visor for a half-hour to an hour.

Move more and turn your pandemic brain 'off'

Having regular times for meals, exercise and starting and ending work helps solidify the body's clock, which helps with sleep. "We've lost all boundaries of when I go to work, when I leave work, when do I be present with the family." says Emerson M. Wickwire, professor of psychiatry and medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. "The brain is now 'on' for many more hours than ideal."

Many people, especially those working from home, aren't moving enough during the day, Dr. Abbasi-Feinberg notes. But the body and brain need a clear distinction between active days and inactive nights to sleep best, she notes. Exercising in the morning can boost daytime alertness. If you exercise later, do it at least four to six hours before bedtime, Dr. Abbasi-Feinberg says. Exercise increases body temperature, and higher body temperature can disrupt sleep.

Watch what you drink

Dr. Abbasi-Feinberg advises her patients to avoid caffeine from the middle of the afternoon on. The advice isn't surprising, but Dr. Abbasi-Feinberg says people often underestimate the amount of caffeine in sodas. And for some sensitive people, the amount of caffeine in chocolate can throw off sleep.

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Also be careful with the timing of alcohol consumption, says Jennifer L. Martin, a professor of medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles. Alcohol initially can make people feel sleepy but as it is metabolized, “It is very alerting,”

she says. That effect kicks in about three or four hours after you drink.

“If you have a glass of wine or two or three at dinner, you may have trouble falling asleep,” she says “If you have a nightcap, you might fall asleep OK but it will fragment your sleep later.”

Avoid naps—or keep them short

If you tend to have trouble falling asleep at bedtime, don't nap during the day, even if you are sleepy, says M. Safwan Badr, professor and chairman of the department of internal medicine at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit. “A nap is like having a peanut-butter sandwich before dinner,” he says. “It ruins your appetite” for sleep.

If you feel like you can't get through the day without a nap, keep it to 20 minutes or less, Dr. Buysse says—“enough to recharge a person's alertness, but not so much that you're stealing sleep from the following night.”

Work on reducing stress

The isolation of the pandemic has taken a toll on many of us—and it isn't helping our sleep. Connecting with loved ones during the day, preferably in person if you can do so safely, fights isolation and helps reduce a stress response to stay awake and be alert, Dr. Buysse says.

Worries rattling around, to-do lists and other ruminating thoughts are often the enemy of sleep. Dr. Wickwire recommends addressing them by keeping a journal where you write down any concerns you have and anything else on your mind. Do it at least a couple of hours before bedtime to give thoughts time to settle.

With practice, he says, you will learn that you “don't need to continue to focus on

that, and those thoughts will be waiting for me in the morning.” End your entry with a “gratitude list,” Dr. Wickwire says. Research has found a link between expressing gratitude and better sleep, he notes.

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