

# Sleep Hygiene - 5 Principles

1. Nobody can voluntarily make themselves fall asleep instantly.
2. Sleep is an automatic process generated by special sleep circuits in the brain.
3. In order to fall asleep & stay asleep, the “arousal systems” which keep us awake must first be turned off to allow tiredness to trigger the sleep “trip switch” in the brain.
4. Arousal systems are switched on or kept switched on by “stimulation” from outside the body (such as light, high temperatures, sound) and from inside the body or brain (such as anxiety, anger, excitement, restlessness & pain).
5. Sleep occurs in cycles of deep and light sleep approximately every 1 ½ hours. If you leave it too late to go to bed you may have to wait for next cycle to start. If you wake up at night, this usually occurs during the light part of a cycle – sleepiness will return.

Sleep hygiene is about reducing external & internal stimulation, to allow the sleep circuits in the brain to switch on and remain switched on. In other words, it is about “tricking” the brain into going to sleep and into staying asleep.

# Sleep Hygiene - 13 Rules

1. **A *wind-down* time at least 30 minutes before bedtime** will help to switch off arousal systems and “trick” the brain into getting ready to switch into sleep. It will also reduce anxiety. It may help to make a list of things that are troubling you and to write down a plan of action for each problem but this should be done at least 30 minutes before sleep and not in the bedroom. Anxiety is an internal stimulus which stimulates the arousal systems and can prevent sleep, impair sleep quality and increase awakenings during the night.
2. **Darkening & cooling the house 30-60 minutes** before bedtime also helps to switch off arousal systems and “trick” the brain into getting ready to switch into sleep.
3. **The bedroom should be quiet, dark & cool. The bed should be comfortable.** A very warm bedroom, an uncomfortably cold room, noises, light, and movements are external stimuli. Leaving lights on, traffic & aircraft noise, text message alerts, a snoring or fidgety partner, pets or children in the bedroom are all likely to disturb your sleep. Having a cool bedroom may promote and deepen sleep (possibly by increasing melatonin secretion). Even if you are not awoken fully, these external stimuli can cause arousals which impair the depth and quality of sleep.
4. **Remove TV, radios, computers & tablets from your bedroom and turn off your mobile phone** (or switch it to silent). Don't have your clock visible. These are all external stimuli which switch on arousal systems in the brain and can prevent or impair sleep.
5. **Have a regular bedtime and waking time.** This strengthens brain's 24 hour clock cycle and leads to regular times of sleep onset. Irregularity can result in arousal systems switching on in the night. Setting an alarm for bedtime (rather than for waking up time) can be helpful!
6. **Don't take daytime naps after 3pm.** This can make it more difficult to sleep at night
7. **Don't stay in bed for longer than 20 minutes** if you wake up and can't get back to sleep. Get up, empty your bladder, have a cool drink, do something relaxing, then go back to bed in a calm state. Remember, sleep comes in cycles and if you remain calm, you should move into the next cycle and become sleepy again.
8. **Exercise during the day.** Regular exercise earlier in the day actually deepens sleep. Even irregular exercise in the day can improve sleep the following night. Avoid intensive exercise within 2 hours of going to bed because exercise raises the body temperature which stimulates the arousal systems.
9. **Don't go to bed hungry or full-up.** Hunger is an arousal stimulus which can disturb sleep; a light snack may help sleep. However, avoid large meals or fatty foods for 2 hours before sleep which can cause arousals.
10. **Taking a hot bath before bedtime** can help relaxation and, provided you allow time to cool off, may actually drop your body temperature which helps to switch on sleep circuits.
11. **Ideally, avoid caffeine after midday and certainly after 4pm.** Caffeine (in coffee, tea & some fizzy drinks) is a stimulant and switches on the arousal systems which prevent sleep. The half-life of caffeine is usually about 5-6 hours (but can be up to 9 hours) which means that only half of it will be gone from the blood after this time. Consuming caffeine after midday can disturb sleep even in those who believe it does not.
12. **Avoid alcohol late in the evening.** Alcohol can temporarily relieve anxiety and make people fall asleep more easily, but the sleep is of poor quality and it increases the tendency to wake up during sleep.
13. **Avoid Nicotine.** Nicotine is another stimulant which switches on the arousal systems and prevent sleep. Smoking real tobacco or electronic cigarettes impairs sleep.