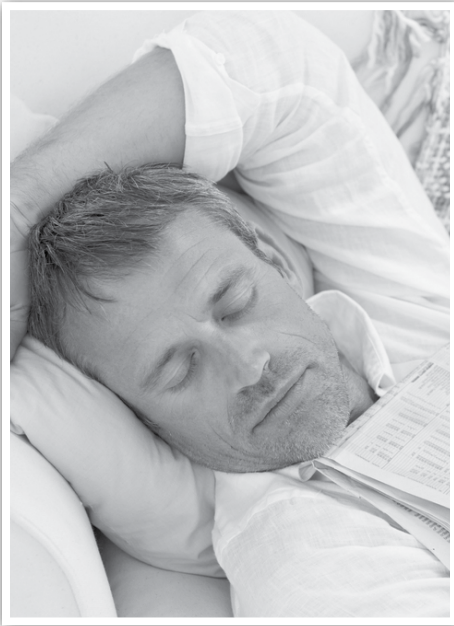


The Sound of Silence:

Strategies for a better sleep

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We've all been there: you find that no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, you just never feel rested. You tell yourself you either didn't get enough sleep, or you got too much sleep. You interrupted a REM cycle. Your mattress is too hard; too soft. You had too much caffeine last night; not enough caffeine this morning. The excuses are endless, but none of them help fix the problem.

A lack of sleep can leave you with more problems than just feeling groggy at the office. Insufficient sleep is responsible for increased susceptibility to illnesses (colds, flus, upper-respiratory ailments), memory deficits, impaired social and occupational functions, increased risk of depressive disorders, impaired breathing, and heart disease.

At this point you've probably read all the books, blogs, magazine articles, even scholarly journals, about sleep tendencies to try to fight your fatigue. Trouble is, all that reading made you even more tired. The following list is here to help you navigate the myriad tips floating around the universe to help you achieve your most restful sleep:

Stick to a sleep schedule—go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

Even though this may seem like an impossibility to a lot of busy people, it's important to keep in mind that a routine can make or break you. Our bodies love rhythms and routines. When you deprive yourself of sleep, your biological

clock can actually start to work against you! Our bodies produce melatonin, a hormone that makes you sleepy. During the day, sunlight triggers the brain to inhibit melatonin production so you feel awake and alert. Irregular sleeping patterns can disrupt this hormone production leaving you feeling groggy at inconvenient times.

Avoid caffeine and nicotine in the evening.

This one seems obviously, but if you're struggling to make it through the day caffeine can easily become a crutch to keep you awake and productive. According to a study in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, drinking caffeine within six hours of bedtime can reduce your sleep by one hour. According to this study, you should avoid drinking caffeine after 5 p.m. if you want to achieve a restful night's sleep. Same goes for nicotine, so skip the smoke.

Alcohol interferes with restorative sleep, so try not to drink close to bedtime.

While the consumption of alcohol might help you fall asleep initially because it acts as a sedative, it actually disrupts sleep making people more wakeful during the second half of a night's sleep. Additionally, moderate to high doses of alcohol consumed around bedtime can narrow one's air passage leading to a fitful sleep, snoring, and episodes of sleep apnea.

Avoid large meals and beverages at night.

This one is pretty simple. Consuming large meals right before hitting the hay means your body is struggling to digest while also trying to fall asleep. Indigestion is likely to follow, making your body uncomfortable. And that big drink is going to have you heading for the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Don't take a nap after 3 p.m.

While a 2008 study by the Center for Brain and Behavior Research at the University of Haifa found that a short nap during the day can help improve memory function and lower blood

pressure, this isn't the case for people who already suffer from insomnia or otherwise have trouble sleeping at night. A daytime nap simply becomes another episode of fragmented sleep.

Exercise.

Regular exercise has been shown to improve sleep quality; when you exercise, you fatigue your body and mind and that helps you sleep more soundly at night. People who engage in moderate exercise for half an hour three to four times per week are found to sleep, on average, 45-minutes to an hour longer per night than people who do not exercise, according to a study done by Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University. But like most benefits of exercise, the study shows that improved sleep is not an immediate result and that the exercise regime must continue to reap the benefits.

Relax before bed—for example, do self-massage or listen to soft music or an audio book.

Counting sheep is out, soft music is in. Taiwanese research told to the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* reported that listening to soft, slow music—around 60-80 beats per minute—caused physical changes in the body that aided restful sleep. These changes included a lower heart rate and respiratory rate, leading to longer, more restful, periods of sleep. Additionally, giving yourself a massage can increase your circulation and calm your nerves, both of which will result in a better, deeper sleep at night.

Take a warm bath (or shower) to raise your core body temperature.

Our body temperature naturally decreases at night, which helps us fall asleep, according to a 1997 study by New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center. By soaking in a hot bath you raise your body temperature, the rapid cool-down period that immediately following relaxes you and is more likely to put you into a deep sleep. The same study states that showers are less effective but can still work in a pinch.

Create a good sleeping environment that is quiet, cool, and dark. Heat, noise, and light are not helpful for sleeping.

Your bedroom should be a sanctuary from the stresses of the day. To achieve your most restful sleep avoid cluttering your room with work related items, such as computers or business phones. Sleep is best achieved at a cool temperature; research suggests that a hot sleeping environment leads to more wake time and lighter sleep at night, while awakenings multiply. And, while music before bed can be relaxing, try to sleep with as few unwanted sounds as possible (such as the TV)—white noise and city sounds have actually been found to aid sleep and become soothing after time.

The lights from electronic devices like tablets and laptops interfere with sleep—avoid using them within 60 minutes of bedtime.

A new study published in the journal *Nature* states that lights from electronics contribute to a poor night's sleep. Similarly to how daylight triggers melatonin production, artificial light can also distort the body's natural rhythm. Professor Charles Czeisler of Harvard Medical School says "[electric] light affects our circadian rhythms more powerfully than any drug," including caffeine. Czeisler goes on to say "Technology has effectively decoupled us from the natural 24-hour day to which our bodies evolved, driving us to go to bed later [but still waking up as early as we ever did]."

Try challenging yourself for a week: remove afternoon caffeine from your diet; don't drink alcohol; and keep your smartphone, laptop, and computer far away from your bed so you're not tempted to use them within an hour of sleep. Allow yourself to relax, shut yourself off from the outside world, and see which of these tips work for you. If you notice a difference within a week, keep up the good work, and even try adding more of these tips into your daily routine. A good night's sleep is a powerful thing, and it's something our bodies crave. Do your best to create the most conducive sleeping environment that you can by implementing these tips and your body will thank you for it. ☺

For more information on sleep strategies, check out our list of resources online at www.vracanada.com/media.php.

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