

# Top Priority

## Good sleep is important to keep your body and mind rested and healthy

COMPILED BY KATE HARTNER

**W**ith busy schedules, many people don't get enough sleep; however, missing sleep can be bad for your health.

Lack of sleep has been linked to events such as car accidents and occupational accidents, as well as health issues like cardiac disease. Therefore, it's important to make it a top priority.

### Helpful Hints

Most people who have trouble sleeping (assuming they do not have an underlying medical issue) are simply not doing the things they should to achieve the sleep they need. This is also known as having poor sleep hygiene. Sleep hygiene refers to the habits and routines that help people get a good night's sleep.

Here are a few helpful tips to get more rest.

- The bedroom is for sleep and sex only, according to Janet Hanson, MS, CRNP, from the Sleep Disorders Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center, Baltimore, who said this is most important. Keep distractions like television, Internet and gaming systems out of the sleeping area.
- Set a bedtime and stick to it! You cannot get enough rest if you are not in bed long enough. Going to bed at night and getting up in the morning at the same time every day keeps your body's clock performing properly.
- "We have expanded our day to the point where we generally don't invest enough time for sleep," said Jeanne Geiger-Brown, PhD, RN, assistant professor in the department of family and community health at the University of Maryland School of Nursing, Baltimore. "Twenty years ago, people typically got 7-7½ hours of sleep a night and now people are getting 6½ hours of sleep a night. That is not



JEFFREY LEESER

The purpose of this patient education handout is to further explain or remind you about a medical condition. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, be sure to discuss them with your healthcare provider. This handout may be reproduced for distribution to patients.

enough sleep ... for humans to function well."

- Avoid naps. An afternoon nap may make it more difficult to achieve quality sleep at night.
- Don't drink alcohol before bed. It may put you to sleep, but when your blood alcohol level drops a few hours later, you will wake again.
- Don't have caffeine (such as soda, coffee or energy drinks) or nicotine (such as cigarettes or other tobacco products) at least 3-4 hours before bed since these chemicals are stimulants and will keep you up.
- Exercise earlier in the day. Your body needs at least 3 hours to wind down after physical activity to sleep well.
- Keep your bedroom cool (around 70° F depending on your preference) to get some lasting, restful sleep. While a warm room may be cozy, you are more likely to wake up sweating and pulling at the covers.
- Keep the window shades drawn and lights off. A dark room will promote a restful night's sleep.
- While you cannot always control sound outside, try to keep the noise levels in your home and bedroom low. Running a fan or playing sounds of water, can drown out noise beyond your walls.

### Still No Sleep?

What do you do when you have tried some of these methods and still can't sleep? The key is to get out of bed. Don't lie in bed hoping you will fall asleep. Tossing and turning won't get you any rest, so leave the bedroom and occupy yourself, returning to bed only when you feel sleepy.

"You shouldn't be watching TV, going online or eating, but do a relaxing, lowlight activity until you are drowsy again," Hanson said. She recommends reading a book.

You can also try a few relaxation techniques, like deep breathing. More ideas are listed at [www.umm.edu/sleep/relax\\_tech.htm](http://www.umm.edu/sleep/relax_tech.htm).

### Seeking Help

Everyone has a sleepless night occasionally and feels the effects, but a constant lack of sleep should be addressed since many health problems — stroke, hypertension and cardiovascular disease — have been associated with it, according to Geiger-Brown.

Lack of sleep is a serious and potentially dangerous matter that should be discussed with a health professional. Sleep studies can then be used to see whether a more serious, physical condition is contributing to your problem with getting enough rest. ■

Kate Hartner is senior associate editor at *ADVANCE*.