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Tips for Improving Sleep

Only use your bed for sleep. Research indicates that restricting your bed exclusively for sleep is the single most effective strategy for improving sleep. The idea is to strengthen the association between your bed and sleeping, so that when you go to bed your body automatically settles into sleep. Don't use your bed to read, watch TV, study, check your laptop or cell phone, and so forth.

If you can't sleep, get out of bed. Avoid having your bed become a place of frustration and tossing and turning. If you don't fall asleep about 20 minutes after going to bed, get up and engage in a boring and restful activity (e.g., read a dictionary) until you begin to feel sleepy, and then go back to bed.

Stick to a sleep schedule. Go to bed and get up at the same time everyday (plus or minus no more than an hour), even on the weekends. This helps regulate your body's "internal clock."

Practice a relaxing bedtime ritual. A relaxing, routine activity right before bedtime can help separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress, or anxiety. Your routine might consist of doing a relaxation exercise, taking a warm shower, praying or meditating, or listening to calm music or nature sounds, etc.

Evaluate your bedroom. Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep. Your bedroom should be dark, cool, and free from noise that can disturb your sleep. Consider using "blackout curtains," eye shades, earplugs, "white noise" machines or recordings, humidifiers, fans, etc. It is best to take work materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment.

Exercise daily. Vigorous exercise is best, but even light exercise is better than no activity. Exercise at any time of day, but not at the expense of your sleep.

Avoid naps. "Power napping" may help you get through the day, but if you find that you can't fall asleep at bedtime eliminating even short catnaps may help feel especially sleepy at bedtime.

Avoid caffeine. Even if you don't think caffeine impacts your sleep, it's a stimulant and it probably does. If you use caffeine, use it before mid-afternoon.

Avoid alcohol, cannabis, and other drugs before bedtime. Although drinking, smoking pot, and using other drugs can make you feel sleepy, many psychoactive drugs tend to disrupt the natural sleep cycle, and in particular interfere with the "deeper" and most restful stages of REM sleep. Many drugs also produce a "rebound effect," so that as they wear off you will find yourself waking up too early.

Avoid using sleep medications. Although over-the-counter and prescription sleep remedies can be useful for brief episodes of sleep difficulty, many medications are problematic if used over a period of time. Consult with your primary medical provider before taking sleep medications, and do your research about short- and long-term side-effects of any medications you consider.

Secure a thorough medical evaluation. If your sleep problems persist, consult with your primary medical provider. A wide range of medical concerns can contribute to sleep problems, and sometimes an overnight "sleep study" at a specialized clinic can help identify the source of persistent insomnia.