

Sleep Strategies: Let's "CU Sleep!"

Cornell students say lack of sleep is one of the top factors hindering their academic performance. Research also suggests that consistent "good sleep" (8 or more hours of solid sleep at the same time each day) plays a crucial role in your ability to learn and recall information later. When you are well rested, you are more alert, focused, and better able to process and learn new information and skills.

Even when you're asleep, your brain never really rests. It is actively working to strengthen and refine neural connections and pathways, similar to how a computer performs "disk defragmentation" to consolidate its data for efficiency. This process allows the brain to more easily recall information just learned.

The quality and quantity of sleep contributes to your resilience, productivity, performance and overall emotional and physical health.

We know it's not easy, but if you're ready to make sleep more of a priority in your life, experiment with these sleep tips (adapted from the Mayo Clinic and other sleep experts) to see which might work for you and fit best into your lifestyle. A little improvement goes a long way.

1. Be consistent: keep a regular bedtime and rising time. When you get regular, good quality and continuous sleep, you feel refreshed and alert during your waking hours and drowsy when it's bedtime. Irregular bed or rising time puts your internal clock or circadian rhythm out of sync with the external clock, so that you feel groggy and unfocused during the day; and you may have difficulty getting to sleep and/or staying asleep at night.

Sleeping in late on weekends to "catch up" on sleep may be tempting, but you may be better-served by an afternoon power nap or by going to bed a little earlier that night. Similarly, pulling all-nighters can put your body into "jet lag" mode.

Work on improving your time management throughout the day and early evening to avoid the need to study through the night.

2. Avoid the sleep stealers: caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and other drugs. Turn off the caffeine by late afternoon, as it can affect sleep up to 8 hours after being consumed. Nicotine's stimulant effects on the brain can make falling asleep difficult, and the withdrawal symptoms can wake

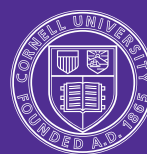
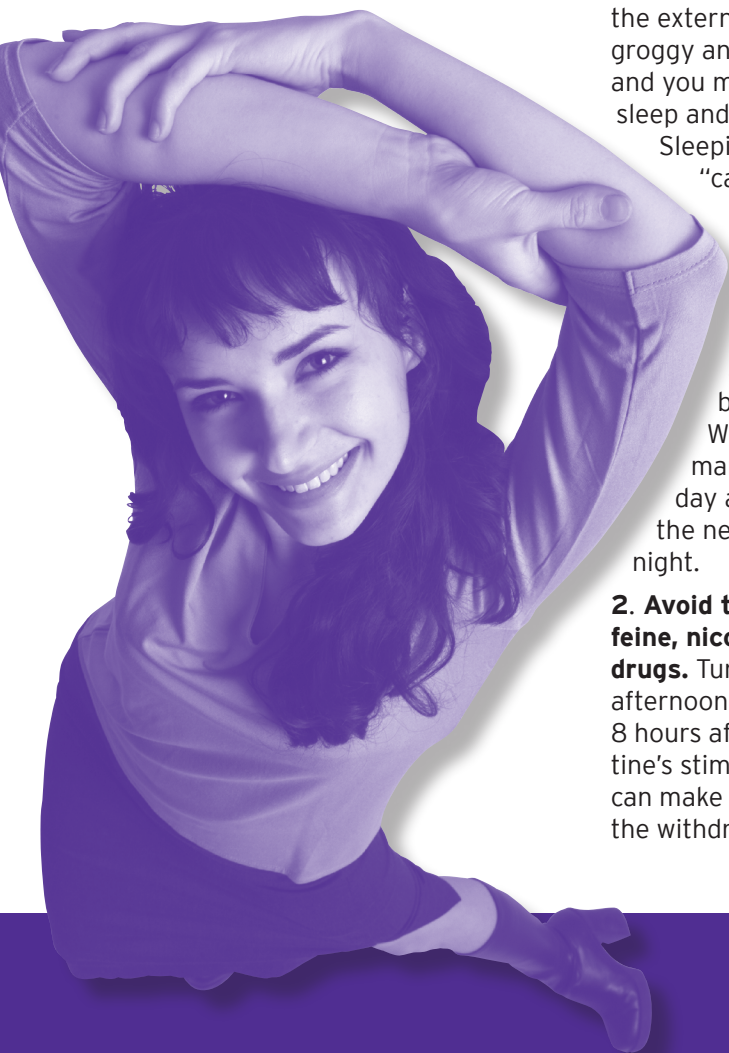
you during the night. Alcohol may make you feel relaxed at first, but it has a stimulating "rebound effect" after several hours and may lead to a night of restless sleep. Other drugs (e.g., prescription, over-the-counter, and "under-the-radar") can interfere with sleep and should be explored as possible contributors to poor sleep.

3. Exercise, but not right before bedtime. Regular physical activity (30 minutes or more a day) can enhance the quality of sleep. Just don't exercise within a few hours of sleep, as it's more likely to energize than relax you.

4. Avoid having a heavy meal close to bedtime. Spicy or fatty foods may give you heartburn, making it harder to sleep. If you're hungry before going to bed, eat a light snack combining a protein (such as turkey, milk, cheese, cottage cheese or yogurt) with a carbohydrate (such as bread, crackers, cereal or cookies). Avoid drinking a lot of fluid near bedtime, or you may have to get up for repeated trips to the bathroom.

5. Enjoy a short nap. Power naps are 20-30 minute periods of sleep that can improve your mood, focus and awareness. While longer naps can leave you feeling groggy, and may interfere with nighttime sleep, these short naps can give you a lift in the afternoon and not interfere with your ability to fall asleep at night.

6. Save your bed for sleep and relaxation. If your body gets used to the idea of studying in bed, you may be confusing it. Try moving your studying to a desk or a lounge instead. If you absolutely must use your bed for studying, make sure you transform it into a place distinctly devoted to sleep when you really need ZZZ's.



7. Know what works for you. When you feel comfortable in your bed, it's easier to get a good night's sleep. Invest in a good pillow. Consider your sleepwear. If you tend to get cold, make sure you have warmer nightclothes and socks at the ready. If silence is important to you while sleeping, use earplugs. A sleep mask will block unwanted light. Also consider such things as an air conditioner or fan to keep the room cool, a dehumidifier if you're bothered by moist air, or a humidifier if you're bothered by dry air.

8. Power down. Turn off your phone, laptop, TV or video game 30-60 minutes before you want to sleep. Research shows that screen time or other media use before bedtime interferes with sleep. Working or playing at night in front of a bright display may alter the normal nocturnal changes in melatonin and body temperature associated with a person's biological clock.

9. Establish a "relax and wind down" routine. Listen to quiet music, take a hot shower or bath (or whatever works for you) to ease tense muscles and calm your mind. Try a cognitive strategy such as journal writing. Express your gratitude for two to three things you encountered that day. Practice relaxation techniques (such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, imagery, or prayer) to still the mind, relax your body, and help you drift off to sleep. Use soothing background noise (e.g. a fan, soft instrumental music, etc.) to mask sounds you can't control (like traffic or neighborhood noise). If you haven't fallen asleep in 20-30 minutes, get up and do something different; but try to stay in dim light. You might leave the bedroom, eat a small snack, read something light, or listen to soft music. If you have gotten out of the habit of falling asleep fairly quickly, you may need to re-train yourself.

10. Don't dwell on worries and frustrations. The stress this creates will only prevent sleep. Keep a note pad next to your bed to move things out

of your mind onto a "to do" or "worry list." This will help you avoid replaying the same list of concerns over and over in your head.

11. Consult with a health care provider before using sleeping pills or other "sleep aids." While sleeping pills may play a useful role when taken as prescribed, they can become habit-forming and/or lose their effectiveness over time. They should be used only for short periods of time (i.e., no more than four weeks, or as prescribed). It's essential to discuss with a clinician how sleeping pills might interact with other medications you're taking or with an existing medical condition. Use the lowest dosage, and never mix alcohol and sleeping pills. If you feel sleepy or dizzy during the day, talk to your health care provider about changing the dosage or type of medication, or discontinuing the pills altogether.

12. Reclaim your time to make room for sleep! Gaining control over how you spend your time while you are awake will help you get the time you want for sleep. Make a plan for how to use your time each day to meet your priorities for courses, work, social life, and personal time. Make "to do" lists. Eliminate time-wasters that show little payoff for the effort. Set time limits for every task and try to stick to them.

Adopting some or all of these strategies can help most people get back on track with their sleep before chronic sleep problems develop. Don't be afraid to experiment and see which combination works for you.

When to get help

Sometimes, an inability to sleep is symptomatic of a broader issue. Snoring or breathing pauses during sleep may be linked to obstructions within the nose or throat. Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep or an inability to feel refreshed even after a full-night of sleep may be related to high levels of stress or underlying depression.

While everyone may experience problems with sleep from time to time, it's important to get help if you feel that an on-going lack of sleep is preventing you from being successful in your daily life, and/or that your mood or energy level is suffering. A clinician (at Gannett or elsewhere) can work with you to identify underlying causes and help prescribe treatment.

Keeping an ongoing log or a "sleep diary" (listing bedtimes, wake-up times, and other information related to your sleep), may help your clinician work with you. For an easy-to-use sleep log go to: www.sleep.health.columbia.edu.

Call 255-5155 or log on to *myGannett* to schedule an appointment.

For more information

- Gannett website: select "Sleep" under Topics & Concerns heading www.gannett.cornell.edu
- The National Sleep Foundation www.sleepfoundation.org
- The Better Sleep Council www.bettersleep.org

Contact us:

We are open Monday-Saturday, except for breaks. Check the website for hours:

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