



Sleep and how to get more of it

Watch what you drink. The effects of caffeine (from coffee, black tea, colas, energy drinks and chocolate) can take six to eight hours to wear off in some people. Alcohol may help us fall asleep quickly but it can interfere with REM sleep and disrupt deep sleep. Herbal teas like chamomile, valerian and passiflora may have a sedative effect and make a soothing alternative.



Eat more tryptophan. Tryptophan is an amino acid used to make serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in mood and appetite control, and for melatonin, the hormone responsible for sleep regulation and a powerful antioxidant. Carbohydrates help tryptophan reach the brain so combine tryptophan-rich sources such as nuts, seeds, tofu, cheese, chicken, turkey, red meat, fish, lentils and eggs with a carbohydrate such as oats or fruit.

Reduce sugar and refined grains. Regular intake of foods with a high glycemic load such as sugary foods and refined grain products like cakes, biscuits, bagels, baguettes, etc. can disrupt blood sugar levels. If blood sugar levels fall low in the night you may find yourself waking up and wired from the adrenaline released to try and bring your blood sugar levels up. If this is a problem for you a small complex carbohydrate snack with a little protein-rich food, like an oatcake with a small piece of chicken, an hour before bed may do the trick.

Have a screen free hour before bed. As we become more and more dependent on our phones, tablets and TVs for entertainment our sleep is suffering and the negative impact seems to be worse for young people. A Norwegian study of 10,000 16 to 19 yr olds found that the longer a teenager spent looking at an electronic screen before bed the worse quality they had. The blue light emitted by screens affect the pineal gland, which makes melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep. Aim to have at least one hour before bed to relax and unwind without looking at any screen. Turn off your phone and try a relaxing bath or reading a book instead.

Establish a night-time routine and keep your bedroom cool, dark and free from electronic gadgets that emit light

Relax and unwind. Negative thoughts and worry can have a detrimental effect on sleep. Try writing down what is on your mind to help prevent those stressed-out thoughts going round and round in the middle of the night. Meditation or mindfulness are also great tools. If you can't get to a class to learn the techniques try one of the digital apps available.

Exercise regularly. There aren't many studies on the effect of exercise and insomnia and the exact mechanisms involved aren't known but those that have been done suggest exercise significantly improves sleep for insomniacs. It is best to avoid exercise too close to bed however as this may prove too stimulating.