

Are you finding it difficult to get restful sleep and enough of it?

When you go to bed, what happens? Does it feel like a battle to fall asleep? Or do you fall asleep straight away but you find yourself waking up soon after and you end up tossing and turning?

If any of this resonates with you, you're not alone. American research shows that over one third of their population do not get the recommended 7-9 hours sleep a night (noted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Lack of sleep impacts on your overall health and well being.

While it may be challenging to get the sleep you need, there are numerous steps you can take to support you in getting the rest you need. When we consider sleep it is vital to consider it in the context of your daytime as well as night.

Your daily activities and routines influence your body's ability to wind down satisfactorily come sleep time. Reflecting on what you do in your day can inform what you decide to do to help you to sleep better. Considerable research has been conducted into investigating what supports good sleep.

Much like in any context, if we continue to behave in the same manner, it is likely we will continue to get the same outcomes. Hence it is imperative to consider what healthy changes we can make, which are evidence based, to facilitate us to get a better night's sleep.

Better sleep can often lead to enhanced mood, confidence, focus, concentration, memory, patience, compassion, improved relationships, sex life, appetite, and zest for life. Your body during restful sleep is like our car going to the garage for a service, it heals and restores itself. Restful sleep supports and strengthens your immune system, as well as several other vital health benefits.

Before continuing onto our **10 tips for improved sleep**, I invite you to fill out a diary entry for last night and this morning as best you can:

SLEEP DIARY

	MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
Fill in AM							
Time to bed							
Time up today							
Slept for X hrs?							
Times woke in night							

	MON	TUES	WEDS	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
Fill in PM							
How many caffeinated drinks?							
Time of last caff drink?							
How many mins exercise today?							
Activity in last hour before sleep?							

Continue to fill in this diary daily to help you consider and reflect on your routines, and what kinds of changes you could make to support more restful sleep. The following 10 tips may help you in exchanging some less helpful habits for some more helpful ones.

10 tips for Improved Sleep

1. Set a regular sleep schedule

Going to bed and waking up at more or less the same time everyday – give or take 20 mins. With life being so wonderfully unpredictable this is no easy task. But try not to be dissuaded by that because it comes up no 1 with sleep specialists as an immensely important habit to implement to support good sleep.

Much like a puppy in training at first who'd be looking at you with not a clue of what you're expecting of them, our body too will not respond with getting to sleep right away. But again much like a puppy in training, with consistency, they get in on it and don't look back. This consistency supports your sleep drive to kick in, and you're body will begin to expect sleep during these times.

2. Create a relaxing bedtime/pre-bedtime routine

This means something different for different people. You may need to get creative and experiment with activities to find out what relaxes you. It may be reading a book, giving yourself a foot massage, taking a shower or a warm bath to help your muscles to let go of any tension, listening to classical music, or nature sounds, sleep music, meditating, or colouring.

3. Keep your room cool and cosy

If at all possible it's best to have your room cool, quiet and dark at bedtime. Your mattress and pillows should feel comfortable, inviting your body to settle down and relax.

4. Dim the lights after dark

Throughout evolution light continues to be heavily linked to our wake and sleep cycles. Getting sufficient natural light during the day is central to keeping your circadian rhythm, or body clock, on a healthy sleep-wake cycle.

Artificial light interferes with this cycle. Hence it is important on the wind down to sleep time (one hour before bed) that we dim lights, and avoid using devices. Many artificial lights give out a blue tone that's actually proven to stimulate, and awaken the body. You may have noticed its usage in bars and clubs.

5. Create space for You without devices at least an hour before bed

Screens don't make for restful minds or restful sleep. Sleep with your phone out of reach. Reaching for the phone when you can't sleep engages and stimulates the mind which perpetuates sleep difficulties. If your phone is pinging with notifications, it is affecting you, put it to silent, or aeroplane mode. A battery alarm clock (or digital that doesn't have a light) may make a more supportive bedroom assistant.

6. Confine stimulants to early in your day

If you are having difficulties sleeping, it might be useful to consider what stimulants you are used to having in your day. Caffeine in teas, coffees, soft drinks and chocolate is a stimulant. Some medications and herbal treatments contain caffeine. Read ingredients to ensure what you're taking doesn't have stimulants in it unbeknownst to you. Remember nicotine too is a stimulant and while it may feel soothing at the time, it activates the body and it's best to avoid smoking particularly in the wind down before sleep.

7. Consider how your eating habits may be influencing your sleep quality

Research shows us that citrus fruits, spicy food, fatty or fried food, and heavy meals are all difficult to digest and can trigger indigestion. Lying down shortly after having a big meal while your digestive system is still very active can result in heart burn and feeling very unsettled leading to a disrupted night's sleep. It takes your stomach 3 to 4 hours to empty.

You might decide to snack in the hours before bed to avoid hunger keeping you awake. A known sleep aid is the amino acid tryptophan. This can be found in chicken, ground beef, milk, nuts and seeds, honey, and bananas. Carbohydrates eaten with tryptophan can cause the production of sleep-inducing serotonin. It is important to choose healthy carbohydrates like whole-grain crackers and fresh fruit.

8. Approach Alcohol with caution

It is difficult to determine the exact impact of alcohol on your sleep quality. Research suggests that while alcohol makes it easier to fall asleep sooner, it does seem to disrupt your second half of sleep.

When you drink a moderate to high levels of alcohol, your REM sleep stage shortens while your slow wave sleep increases. Drinking heavily may leave it more likely that you snore which can harm the quality of your sleep.

9. Get enough exercise in your day

Recent research suggests that rather than a long bout of exercise, your body benefits best for 10 minutes, 3 times a day. Exercise stimulates the body, hence it's important to get your exercise in a few hours before bedtime.

Exercise may be a slow and subtle influence on your sleep, however over time it is said to have a substantial affect on both the quantity and the quality of your sleep.

10. Only use your bed for sleep and sex

Where possible it is best to use your bedroom and your bed just for sleep and sex if you struggle with sleep issues. It is important to build an association between your bedroom and a place of rest.

If you find you're not asleep after spending 20 minutes in bed experts recommend getting out of bed and going to another room. It is suggested to engage in a relaxing activity whether it's listening to music, taking a warm shower or reading, in order to help get you drowsy.

The objective of this tactic is known as stimulus control. Much like it's important to help build the association between bed and rest, it is also important to break the association of bed as a place of frustration and worry.

An extra tip for luck: Be cautious of naps during the day

It is thought that a 10-20 minute nap when tired can help focus, concentration and mood however longer naps have been said to cause drowsiness and they can interfere with the circadian rhythm.

Still having problems after trying these tips?

There are several aids available online that might help you sleep better e.g. meditations, sleepmusic, sleepcasts, and apps (e.g. CALM, Headspace) which may support you further.

You may decide to engage in further support from the Maynooth Student Counselling Service, MU Student Services, or consult your GP.