



HOW TO SLEEP WELL

Basic rules to sleep well and to avoid insomnia problems

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Sleeping is a natural need of our organism and it usually comes to us, without any effort at the end of the day, as a result of our physiological and hormonal cycles. These cycles are the product of the evolutionary adaptation to the external cycles day/night and light/darkness

The high insomnia rate in the current society is, in an important part, due to our way of living. We arrive home everyday with our mind tired and our body rested, when the natural would be the opposite: to have a tired body and a rested mind. This happens because in our ordinary life we do little physical activity –we do not do physical works or exercise or sport- and we have too much mental excitement because of the problems and worries that we carry away until bedtime.

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The adrenaline and the mental activity caused by stress during the day, is the same that, when the night arrives, prevent us from sleeping. Of course, there are other causes of insomnia –occasional or chronic – that we have to keep in mind: physical problems, illnesses, nighttime working shift and some drinks or foods.

Below we summarize some basic recommendations to prevent or overcome these insomnia problems. These are recommendable for everybody, but they are specially advisable for people who have problems related to sleep: they take a lot of time to sleep, they have frequent and lengthy awakening in the middle of the night, their sleep are not deep and refreshing enough, they actually wake up before the expected time and they do not sufficiently rest, etcetera.

- **Physical activity:** A certain amount of physical activity is fundamental to sleep well. If our work or living habits are sedentary, playing some sports or doing physical exercises help us very much at sleeping time. Nevertheless it is advisable not to do these physical activities in the two previous hours to sleeping.
- **Conditioning and ritualisation of going to sleep.** Setting up a routine in all actions related to sleep is very advisable in any case, but it is essential if we have insomnia problems. Sleeping, as most of the human behaviour, is very sensitive to conditioning and to stimulus/response association. Because of this, it is possible to make it easier or more difficult to sleep due to the stimuli that precede or surround it. If we tend to sleep and to wake up at a regular time and in the same place, our sleeping will be better. Also, the repetition of previous behaviours, in the same order and at the same time, such as brushing our teeth,

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removing our make-up, preparing clothes for the next day, and so on, has positive conditioning effects on our sleeping.

- **Having a suitable and light dinner and never immediately before going to sleep.** For our general health and to sleep well, our dinner should neither be heavy nor eaten shortly before going to bed. There is some food that is recommended for dinner, among these the one that contains *triptófano*, a precursor of *melatonine* that is called "the sleeping hormone". Some of these items of food are: eggs, milk, oat, whole cereals, bananas, potatoes, etcetera. Also qualities to lure sleep have been attributed to some infusions as lime flowers, valerian and so on, but the most important thing is not to have stimulants (coffee, tea, cola, spices, etcetera). If we have insomnia problems we should avoid these stimulants at the previous hours to sleep but all along the day because their effects can be more prolonged than we think.
- **Suitable environment.** It is obvious that silence, keeping a proper temperature, the absence of light, having a comfortable sleep clothing, cosy mattress and so on help us very much to get to sleep. Nevertheless we should not go to the opposite side and be obsessed by little inconveniences, thinking that they are incompatible with sleeping correctly. If it is required our body can adapt and we are able to sleep in any situation. It is our mind and, above all our nerves which get into focusing our attention towards certain noises or annoyances that can prevent us from sleeping.

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- **Avoiding, as much as possible, having sleeping pills.** Medication should be considered the last solution for extraordinary situations. It is better if they are never necessary, but, in any case, we must avoid having them more than it is strictly necessary, according to medical instructions, and we must never abuse of them. In another way, we will end up being chronic sleeping pill consumers and a moment will arrive when we will not be to fall asleep without having them. Insomnia will have gone from being an isolated problem to a permanent problem.
- **Not remaining awoken in bed.** It is usual to advise that if we are in bed and it is impossible for us to sleep, it is better to get up and to do any relaxing task until we are sleepy. This rule can be acceptable in general terms, specially for those who have chronic insomnia problems. It is little recommendable to remain long time in bed, turning around, self-observing and waiting for a sleep that never arrives. However, we should adapt this rule to our personality and circumstances. For many people it is useful, without getting up from bed, to do relaxation exercises, positive visualisations, reading, listening to the radio or watching television. Because of this, it is advisable to learn, at least, one suitable relaxation technique.
- **Neither minding the clock nor “striving” for sleeping.** When we are in bed, we have to forget to look at the clock. Neither do we have to be worried if any day it is difficult for us to get to sleep or we wake up sooner than it is usual. In the same way, nothing happens if we sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and we have to wait to return to sleep. In all these cases the biggest danger, as we have said is to

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succumb to the excessive “self-observation” or to be anxious about sleeping. It never comes if we are expectant. We must move away from our minds any conscious effort to look for sleeping and let it come itself. As we have said, this is a natural process that does not need to be forced. We must only be carried along by it.

- **Leaving any worry out from the bedroom.** When we are going to sleep we must let out of our mind any worry, problem or negative thought. Bed is not a place where to look over what we have done along the day, neither to worry about what we are going to do during the day. Our bedroom should be our “psychological sanctuary”, quiet and propitious to sleep. This way, besides disconnecting with the problems and with the excess of mental activity, we get, not only a deeper and reinvigorating sleeping, but also we will wake up with our mind clean and with renewed energy and strength to live a new day.
- **Not sleeping along the day.** If we want to keep or recover our healthy sleeping cycle, we should not sleep during the day. If we have occasionally had a bad night, it is better to wait for sleeping within our usual time and so to return to our normal sleeping cycle. And, if we have a nap it should not last more than thirty or twenty minutes.
- **Pulling down the need for sleeping certain number of hours.** Not all people need to sleep eight hours. Everyone could need to sleep a different number of hours, according to their genetic base and circumstances (age, way of living, and so on). In some cases it could be six, in others eight or other different number of hours. What is important for sleeping is that it must be restorative and we must wake up

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rested and not feeling along the day any sign of lack of sleep: tiredness, somnolence, etcetera.

- **Having our “sedative thought” ready.** A problem for many people is that some ideas, images or problems – often absurd and untimely - go into their minds and prevent them from sleeping. These are called “intrusive thoughts” that commonly appear in slumber moments or when we try to return to sleep after waking up during the night. Given that these thoughts are not easy to eliminate, the best thing is that we have any thought or visualization which is pleasant prepared. That very sedative thought or visualization could be used as long as it were necessary since it does not wear out when it is used. On the contrary, the more it is used to sleep the deeper its effects are, because it is linked to sleep, so it is every time more effective.
- **Being relaxed and quiet during the day.** The better we are asleep the better we will be awake. And vice versa. There is a direct relationship between sleep and wakefulness. Bad nights are usually caused by bad days. If when the sleeping time arrives we are nervous, stressed with negative feelings , etcetera, it is difficult to get to sleep. We will not be able to achieve the calm and tranquillity that we need to sleep. We cannot ask our mind to immediately break, in this very moment, with the activation which has been with us along the day. If we are able to take our lives in a more relaxing and calm way, we realise that, without effort, it is easier for us to sleep well every night.