

Sleep Naturally

By Donna Henderson, AP, RN

Sleep is one of the necessities of life. Our bodies are meant to be restored through restful shut-eye. Almost everyone has an occasional difficult night sleeping, perhaps because of a neighbor's dog barking, a sick child crying or eating too much for dinner the night before. Chronic sleep shortage, however, can cause many physical problems. Daytime drowsiness contributes to potential traffic accidents, decreased mental sharpness and loss of productivity.

In the not-so-distant past people probably slept when the sun went down and rose at sunrise. That means that we would have slept considerably more during the winter than the summer. Our current lifestyle usually does not accommodate that type of behavior. We are expected to do many things at night and rise, with the help of a trusty alarm clock, well before the sun does.

Lunar changes may also affect us in ways we don't often associate. People often have more energy around the full moon and less at new moon. Circadian rhythms blend with the earth's natural ebb and flow.

Poor sleep can mean trouble getting to sleep, waking easily, trouble falling back to sleep, or waking without feeling rested. Many causes include:

Forcing ourselves to work or participate in other activities during times our body needs rest

Too much caffeine or stimulants

Overeating, especially at night

Lack of exercise during the day

Worry, fears or anxious thoughts

Changes (new bed, loss of sleeping partner, staying in a motel or different environment)

Pain

Bladder or bowel needs during sleep hours

Coughing, sneezing, difficulty breathing

Medication

Alcohol may induce sleep, but it is often not restorative because of not getting to deep sleep.

Treatment options without sleeping pills include:

Getting in touch with your own rhythms and honoring them as much as you choose.

Treating whatever is keeping you awake, like pain.

Get your bedroom to be as "yin" as possible: dark, quiet, cool and soothing.

Avoid doing anything "yang" in your bedroom, such as paying bills or watching TV, especially exciting or violent shows. The news can keep you awake with worry. Consider taking a break from the news.

At the end of the day, spend a few minutes evaluating the day. Congratulate yourself on the ways you showed love, even to yourself. Review any changes you want to make. Journaling sometimes helps.

Create a routine at bedtime, which could include a warm bath, quiet music, gentle Qi Gong or other movement and prayer or inner reflection. Rubbing the bottoms of your feet can be very relaxing before bed.

Keep paper and pen by your bed in case your grocery list or “to do” list keeps you awake. Simply write them down, so you’ll have it tomorrow.

Be grateful in advance for a good night’s sleep. If you worry about getting enough sleep it may keep you awake.

If you wake at 3 a.m. try gently rubbing acupuncture points near your shoulders about an inch under your collar bones.

Try breathing through your left nostril for a little while. One yoga instructor says that breathing through the right nostril promotes alertness and the left nostril promotes sleep. Close your right nostril with your finger. Even ten to twenty slow deep breaths through the left nostril may help.

Make friends with your dreams. They are a key to your unconscious. In the morning write at least a brief note of your dream. Spend time allowing a meaning to come to you by quieting your mind.

When you think of people having to sleep on the ground or a bed of straw, give thanks for your soft pillow and comfortable bed. Crawl between the sheets and drift gently into a pleasant slumber. Sweet dreams!