

What is sleep hygiene and why is it important?

Sleep hygiene refers to the practices around your sleep. Good sleep hygiene means having healthy routines that promote good, restful sleep. Easier said than done, we know!

Below are some tips for establishing healthy sleep patterns. They may seem obvious, but it's important to make sure you're ticking all of the boxes, as getting good sleep is one of the most powerful things you can do to improve your mental (and physical) health - it is vital for focus, concentration and being able to perform daily tasks, and there is good evidence it plays a big role in mood and anxiety disorders as well as other neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD and ASD. Sleep is a complex process, and often requires a holistic range of approaches to see improvements. Let's get into some of these key approaches.

Checking up on your mental and physical health

Make sure you address any mood conditions (i.e. anxiety) or physical health issues (i.e. pain, sleep apnea) with a doctor that could be impacting on your sleep.

Exercise regularly

A minimum of 30 minutes of exercise a day (even walking) helps ensure you are both physically and mentally ready to go to sleep.

Be mindful of your circadian rhythm

Have a regular wake-up time, which is often more effective than trying to have a set bedtime and reduces the risk of reverse sleep cycles. Try to maintain this on weekends, too. Avoid napping during the day, which also confuses your circadian rhythm.

Limit alcohol, drugs, caffeine and sugar

These substances impact on sleep patterns. Limit drug and alcohol use, avoid sugar in the lead up to bed, and skip any caffeinated drinks after lunch time.

Create the right environment

Train your body and mind to wind down before sleep by keeping to a regular routine - a tea, hot shower or (audio) book. Limit screen time and avoid phones or tablets for at least an hour before bed. Try meditation apps like Smiling Mind, Calm or Headspace. Reserve your bedroom for night-time and sleep. Don't lie awake in bed for more than 20-30 minutes; instead of tossing and turning, try resetting with a glass of water. Involve partners or family members in this process - they can help by maintaining similar sleep practices.

Medications and sleep

Most people can improve sleep patterns through behavioural changes alone. Occasionally your doctor may recommend certain medications in addition to practicing good sleep hygiene. These might be medications to help with anxiety or sleep patterns (i.e. melatonin). As all medications come with a risk of side effects, discuss this with your psychiatrist or GP.