



Secrets *of* Healthy Americans

Secret #2: Sleep Better



SECRET #2: SLEEP BETTER



You are the master of your universe. Or, at least when it comes to sleep, you can try to be. For many people, sleeping well—or sleeping poorly—is largely a learned behavior. You can teach yourself to be an insomniac by trying to cram too much into your day, going to bed too late, worrying yourself to sleep, waking up tired—and then repeating the self-defeating routine day after day. *Or you can teach yourself to sleep longer and better!*

Our **Humana Reader's Digest Healthy Habits Survey 2012** shows that the 14 percent of Americans who are considered especially fit and healthy sleep nearly an hour longer a night than the average American (nearly eight hours vs. a little fewer than seven). And they are far more likely to wake up feeling refreshed and ready to face the day (59 percent vs. only 42 percent on average).

! Experts say the body needs eight hours a night to restore itself and help you wake up feeling refreshed. They note that getting the proper amount of sleep can:

- Improve your overall energy
- Strengthen immunity
- Lower the risk of diabetes
- Help weight control
- Brighten your mood
- And boost mental alertness and memory

HERE ARE EIGHT STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP, STARTING TONIGHT:

SET YOUR INTERNAL CLOCK Your goal is to establish a habit of getting eight hours of sound sleep every night, including weekends. If you are like most people in this sleep-deprived nation, you tell yourself you'll catch up on your rest on the weekend. Sometimes you do. Often you don't. Sound familiar?

The better way to get your proper rest is to block out the same eight or more hours for sleep every night—without exceptions. Try this. Go to sleep before 11 p.m. and wake up without an alarm clock a few nights in a row. That should help you discover your natural sleep cycle. If it's less than eight hours at first, slowly expand it. The point is to commit to a habit-forming routine of reserving the same eight-hour period for sleep every night.

SECRET #2: SLEEP BETTER



If you need a reminder to turn in, set an alarm to signal that it's time to prepare for bed.

You can also help to set your internal clock for sleep by exercising more vigorously. If your schedule and conditioning permits, experts suggest exercising enough to raise your body temperature for 30 minutes or so in the late afternoon. Your body will naturally cool down as the evening progresses, helping you to fall asleep quickly and sleep more soundly.

AVOID SLEEPWALKING THROUGH YOUR DAY Waking up tired and dragging through the day can easily become self-perpetuating. Don't fall into the trap. For example, a jolt of coffee at breakfast to get you going is normally fine. But do not keep pumping yourself up with coffee and soda after lunchtime. The caffeine and sugar will linger in your system and can often keep you awake at bedtime.

Napping also can become a bad habit. Many experts say short naps of 10 minutes or so can be refreshing and should not disturb your internal sleep clock. However, do not fall into a daytime pattern of napping for 30 minutes or longer. Napping that long can prevent you from falling asleep at night and then waking up tired all over again. Beyond that, such long naps may be a symptom of deeper health concerns.

Try this. If you feel yourself dragging, instead of a blast of caffeine or a nap, simply go outside for a walk in the sun. Sunlight helps regulate the body's sleep cycle. The sunlight signals your body to curb production of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin. Then, when night falls, your body compensates by stepping up production of the hormone—and helping you fall asleep.

LULL YOURSELF TO BED Your bedtime should begin up to an hour before you tuck in. The idea is to establish a relaxing routine. Begin by shutting off the TV or computer and wind down from your day. Do whatever relaxes you, such as listening to soothing music, reading a novel or soaking in a hot bath. If you follow a relaxing routine faithfully, it will become an ingrained signal to your body to let go of the stresses of the day and embrace sleep.

SECRET #2: SLEEP BETTER

MAKE YOUR BEDROOM YOUR COMFY CAVE The room should be dark, uncluttered (no TV or computer or pile of bills), as quiet as possible, and cool at 68 degrees or less. Make a list of whatever tends to disrupt your sleep and eliminate each disturbance. Light? Draw the drapes, ditch the glowing digital clock and perhaps try an eye mask. Noise from the street or a snoring mate? White noise machines can help, though our Healthy Habits Survey shows that only 4 percent of Americans use them. If you'd rather not invest in one, try a simple floor fan. The fan's whirring sound may be enough to muffle the noise, and the fan itself should help you cool down for sleep. Or consider quality earplugs. They can be comfortable and very effective.

STOP TRYING TO FORCE YOURSELF TO SLEEP The vast majority of Americans (69 percent) fall asleep within the healthy benchmark of 15 minutes after shutting off the lights. If you find yourself still awake after 20 minutes or so, stop staring at the ceiling. The more you try to will yourself to sleep, the more tense you'll become and the more wide awake you're likely to be. The principle to keep in mind is that your bed is for sleeping, not worrying—including worrying about falling to sleep. So get up, go out of the bedroom and resume your relaxing routine. When you feel sleepy again, head back to bed.

MINIMIZE WHATEVER WAKES YOU DURING THE NIGHT Our Survey supports what the experts say: Waking during the night can become a problem as people age. A full 42 percent of those 65 and older wake up two or more times a night. By contrast, half of all adults under 45 years of age do not wake up at all during the night. The national average is once a night (1.06). And experts consider waking up once a night, usually to urinate, rather normal. Still, if you want fewer nighttime calls, try avoiding fluids, especially sugary drinks or alcohol, two hours before bedtime. On the other hand, if you are waking up three or more times a night, you may want to speak to your doctor about addressing any underlying causes, such as chronic pain or complications from medicines.



SECRET #2: SLEEP BETTER

DON'T TREAT SNORING AS A JOKE If you know anyone who snores loud enough to disturb others, chances are the cause is no laughing matter. Snoring that can sometimes match the noise of rush-hour traffic (82 decibels) can be associated with obesity. And if the snoring is accompanied by brief interruptions in breathing, the person could have sleep apnea, a potentially life-threatening condition that can lead to high blood pressure and stroke. Describe the snoring to your doctor, and ask about whether you should see a sleep specialist.

PUT DOWN THAT PILL Our Survey shows that nearly one person out of ten (9 percent) is popping pills to fall asleep, including 6 percent who are taking prescription medicines, including non-benzodiazepine hypnotics. As a general rule, experts say you should not need sleeping pills if you adopt a sensible sleep routine such as the one presented here. Data from clinical trials also raise questions about how truly effective the drugs are at combating insomnia compared to placebos. In addition, sedative hypnotics can contribute to daytime fatigue and brain fog that can lead to serious accidents.

Furthermore, as reported in *The New York Times* in March, research dating back to 2007 has tied sleeping pills to an increased risk of death. Large-scale studies here and in Canada, Norway and Sweden suggest that patients taking prescription sleep aids regularly for prolonged periods were more likely to die than non-users. Critics of the most recent study, here in the U.S., noted that people taking sleeping pills tend to be sicker than non-users, and also suffer from insomnia, which creates additional health complications. They also noted that the analysis did not prove that sleeping pills cause death, only that there may be a correlation between the two. Still, Dr. Nancy A. Collop, President of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, told *The New York Times*: "If someone comes to me on a sleeping pill, usually my tactic is to try to take them off it."

Dr. David Katz, Director of Yale University Prevention Center, adds: "It's important to underscore that behavioral approaches to sleeping better can generally get the job done, without the risks associated with drugs."





HERE ARE **23 DO'S AND DON'T'S** OF SLEEP

- 1 Do sip herbal “sleepy time” chamomile tea after dinner.
- 2 Don't drink caffeinated beverages, including coffee, tea or soda, after lunchtime.
- 3 Do turn down the thermostat to help your body lose heat 60 to 90 minutes before you go to bed.
- 4 Don't allow your furry little companion to jump into bed with you, no matter how much you love the rascal. Experts say 21 percent of dogs snore, and cats love little more than pouncing on your feet at 3 a.m.
- 5 Do consider investing in a body-conforming mattress, especially if you have chronic pain that disturbs your sleep.
- 6 Do also consider investing in separate mattresses with different levels of firmness for you and your mate, linked by a common headboard.
- 7 Don't ignore any allergies that can affect your breathing or otherwise disturb your sleep.
- 8 Do sleep on a thin pillow to minimize neck strain if you tend to sleep on your back.
- 9 Do sleep on a thick pillow if you sleep on your side.
- 10 Don't let the sun shine in before the time you want to wake up.
- 11 Do talk to your doctor if you find yourself lying awake feeling hopeless or depressed night after night.
- 12 Don't let your glowing digital clock keep reminding you that you're still awake. Ditch it, or at least turn it around at night.
- 13 Do consider sleeping in another room to avoid a sleep-disturbing snorer.

SECRET #2: SLEEP BETTER

- 14 Don't ignore the snoring, however. It may be the sign of a significant health issue (as discussed above).
- 15 Do consider painting or decorating your bedroom with soothing colors, such as sage green or luminous blue.
- 16 Do try introducing the scent of lavender or jasmine. Two studies report that lavender can be as effective as sleeping pills, and separate studies suggest jasmine may work even better than lavender.
- 17 Don't eat for two hours before you get into bed.
- 18 Do write down your to-do list for tomorrow at least two hours before you head to bed to help clear your mind.
- 19 Don't work, eat, read for long, or even talk on the phone in bed.
- 20 Do consider wearing 100 percent cotton pajamas for cool comfort.
- 21 Don't resort to over-the-counter or prescription sleeping aids for more than a short time, if at all.
- 22 Do ask your doctor if one or more of your medications may be interfering with your sleep.
- 23 Don't smoke—but you already know that.



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Look for next month's installment to **Secrets of Healthy Americans** on **ReadersDigest.com/habits**. And read our next Healthy Habits report in the July/August *Reader's Digest*.



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