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## How To Get Better Sleep

If you're constantly burning the midnight oil to get everything done both inside and outside your physical therapy clinic, a good sleep routine might seem like a dream. But getting solid sleep is critical to staying healthy and continuing to take care of your patients.

"Stress affects the nervous system, endocrine system, and immune function," says Kate Huether, MD, who received her medical degree from Johns Hopkins University and a master's degree in nutrition at Columbia University. "It can lead to a state of hyperarousal, which makes it difficult to sleep."

When you care for others as a busy physical therapist or physical therapist assistant, there are all kinds of stress-inducing concerns. So sleeping well may be easier said than done. One thing's for sure: You can't just expect it to happen. Here's what the pros say about how to get better sleep.

### 1. Get serious about creating a tech-free bedtime ritual.

A tech-free routine starting at least two hours before your bedtime is one of the best things you can do for your sleep quality. Research continues to show that blue light from screens disrupts your melatonin production at night, your circadian rhythm, and your ability to fall asleep.

Instead of watching TV or scrolling through emails and social media, design a nighttime routine that helps you fall asleep and stay asleep. It could include stretching (more on that later), meditation, and reading books and magazines. But whatever your ritual, consider kicking it off with a hot bath or shower. According to Huether, this helps lower your body's core temperature, which sends the signal it's time to sleep.

### 2. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

A 2011 study published in the journal *Chronobiology International* found that consistent, regular bedtimes and rise times make it easier for participants to fall asleep and help improve the quality of that sleep. Additionally, the results showed that continuing to wake up at the same time on weekends as on weekdays made participants less likely to feel sleepy during the week and increased the duration of their weekday slumber.

Sleep scientist Matt Walker, who founded the Center for Human Sleep Science and is a professor of neuroscience and psychology at the University of California, says keeping a regular bedtime is one of the top things you can do to improve sleep. If you usually operate on an "I'll go to bed when I go to bed" mentality, it might be time to rethink that strategy. Instead, pick a bedtime you can stick to night after night.

### 3. Be wary of blue light, but not too wary.

While it's good to limit blue light exposure from screens at night, you can benefit from it during the day. "Blue light in the morning helps you keep your circadian clock in sync with your watch," says Mariana Figueiro, Ph.D., who studies how light affects human health and has published several studies on the topic.

Think of it like a cup of coffee. "Blue light in the morning can be beneficial to help you feel alert, but you don't want to have it late in the evening before bedtime," she explains. And keep in mind that blue light doesn't just come from screens.

Natural sunlight also contains blue light, and all types of light have alerting effects. "Morning light provides the most benefit in terms of avoiding circadian disruption that can lead to depression, anxiety, and insomnia," says Figueiro. "Even on a cloudy day, you can get more light outdoors than indoors." So head out for a 30-minute morning walk.

#### **4. Make sure your bedroom is dark and cool in the evening.**

For the same reason that light helps wake you up, light at night can prevent you from falling asleep easily. “If we don’t have a natural light-dark cycle, sleep can be disrupted,” says Huether. Your circadian rhythm is counting on that light in the morning to wake up but also less of it at night to fall asleep.

But what about temperature? According to the National Sleep Foundation, the best room temperature for getting better sleep is between 60 and 67 degrees. As Huether hinted at earlier, your body initiates sleep by lowering its core body temperature. After taking a warm bath, your body’s core body temperature will drop, sending the signal that it’s time to sleep. Same idea with a cool bedroom.

#### **5. Consider that booze is hurting more than it’s helping.**

It’s a common misconception that having a few drinks is a good idea when you can’t sleep. Sure, it will help you zonk out, but that’s not the full picture. “Alcohol does in fact make you sleepy and triggers the onset of sleep through adenosine production,” explains Huether. “However, this adenosine production is abruptly stopped after a few hours, causing premature waking.” In short, a few drinks may help you fall asleep, but they won’t help you stay asleep and may cut into your overall sleep quality.

#### **6. Do restorative stretching.**

Holding deep, restorative stretches is another way to help your body relax. Tiffany Grimm, director of learning and development at Exos, registered yoga instructor, and certified personal trainer — explains that it’s deeply restorative for the nervous system. Holding stretches and controlling your breathing helps activate your parasympathetic nervous system so your body (and brain) get the message that it’s time to be calm and relax.

According to Grimm, by breathing deeply through certain stretches, you create a draping effect in the body, and with every breath the muscles release grip and tension. This allows you to relax deeply, and holding the poses for a few minutes each helps create a sort of meditative state as well. She recommends trying to hold these stretches and poses for two to three minutes:

- Legs up the wall.
- Pigeon pose.
- Thigh stretches, like a low lunge.
- Child’s pose.

#### **7. Time your exercise right.**

Overall, fitting regular exercise into your lifestyle is thought to benefit sleep quality. However, exercising too close to bedtime can have the opposite effect. Huether explains that’s because exercise increases your cortisol levels, a stress hormone that can trigger a stress response. “Our cortisol is highest in the morning and then decreases throughout the day,” she says.

Instead of spiking cortisol levels again when your body naturally wants to relax at night, try to avoid exercise at later hours. “Exercising first thing in the morning is generally the best when it comes to sleep,” she says. If you’re craving movement in the evening, try routines that relax your nervous system.

#### **8. Evaluate your relationship with caffeine.**

We know that drinking caffeine or alcohol at night can interfere with sleep. But for some people, your morning cup of joe could also be a culprit. Huether explains that caffeine’s half-life is three to five hours, which is how long it takes to decrease by half in your body. “Whatever is left could remain in your system depending on how quickly your body metabolizes it,” she says. “I know, no coffee is a scary thought. But if you’re having trouble sleeping, and you’ve tried everything else, you may want to replace your morning coffee with herbal tea.”