



to sleep, perchance to dream

sleep better and for longer...

by Wolfgang Mittelmaier, clinic director

Disclaimer

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Good sleep is a good start to everything

There is a lot of research that maintains that longer and better sleep will not only make you live longer but also perform better mentally and physically through-out the day.

About four years ago, I started struggling with sleep issues to a degree that I had never experienced before, so I ended up doing a lot of reading and talking to friends and colleagues about it. One of the best and most concise texts I have come across is "Five things that stop a good night's sleep" on the [BBC website](#).

The following tips may help you get better and longer sleep, but if you have significant problems with sleep, I would very much encourage you to see your GP about them as there can be a myriad reasons for sleep problems and you will want to investigate them as soon as possible.

What is good sleep?

Good sleep quality is not just about the right duration, it also is about the right kind of sleep. A sleep that leaves you refreshed and ready to tackle the challenges of the day consists of about six phases of REM sleep.

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The natural body clock

Our body is built to do different things at different times of day and night. It generally follows a circadian rhythm, similar to plants and animals. It's internal "clock" uses the colour of the light that surrounds us as an indicator that it is on track.

The wrong kind of light

Morning and evening light is much warmer than daylight and the night used to be much darker. It is only very recently in human history that this has changed considerably.

Modern life creates a lot of disorientation for our internal clock by exposing us to a light that often is of the cold, slightly blue daylight variety. Daylight can be found in places where you would not expect it:

- your computer
- your iPad or other tablet
- your smartphone
- your TV
- halogen lighting in your house (even though you can get warm halogen lights or even lights with adjustable colour temperature)
- other lighting in the house (again, you could go for warmer alternatives, even with the new energy saving lights)

For iPads and iPhones on iOS 9.3 or later, you can now use Night Shift to automatically adjust the colour temperature at night - [here is a support article by Apple on how to do it](#).

SAD and SAD lights

On the other end of the scale, and not directly connected to the problem of sleep is [Seasonal Affective Disorder](#), which comes from a lack of exposure to daylight. It usually is a problem that is acute during shorter daylight periods, and by far not everybody is susceptible to it.

However, if you suffer from it, it will affect your mood and consequently increase your overall stress levels, which in turn will affect your sleep quality. SAD lights have come

down in price considerably in the last few years (look at a cheap one here or a higher priced one here), but again, consult your GP if you think you are suffering from it - it is easy to misinterpret symptoms of any kind just because they ring true when described for a particular condition...

Mood

Watching or reading a thriller, going on Facebook or playing a computer game may all look like a welcome distraction after a hard day at work.

However, try to follow it up with comedy or listening to calm music with closed eyes, or something else that is calming and pleasant to you, as you need to slow down brain activity to invite sleep and perchance to dream...

Noise

This is one of the most obvious enemies to a good night's sleep. An easy improvement might be the use of earplugs, and while I currently use them regularly, I am not sure I would recommend it. Not only do they interfere with the natural cleaning process of the inner ear, but a client of mine ended up at A&E twice because they had moved into her ear. As I say, I do use them, but be aware of the downsides.

[Buy earplugs online](#), you will get 50 of them for less than £10, a fraction of the price you would pay at your high street chemist.

Food

Food is tricky. If you eat too much too late, you will sleep badly as your body is busy digesting. If you eat nothing, you will either not sleep well or not at all. The body will wake you up if your blood sugar falls below a certain level to avoid you falling into a coma.

So get the balance right: Don't eat too heavy a meal in the evening and do your very best to eat it by 7.30pm. But have some carbohydrates about an hour or two before you go to bed, so you don't get the blood sugar problem. A glass of milk can be enough, anything that has a low [glycaemic index](#), i.e. it releases sugars into your blood stream in a slow, sustained way, rather than

in one big quick rush as milk chocolate or white bread would do, for example.

Caffeine

If you are over 30 or you are having problems falling asleep, you may want to experiment with stopping caffeine intake at around 3pm.

Temperature

It is really important to get this right: If you are too hot, your body temperature cannot go down a notch, as it will naturally want to during sleep. If you are too cold, you will be uncomfortable and not sleep deeply enough.

Monitor your sleep quality

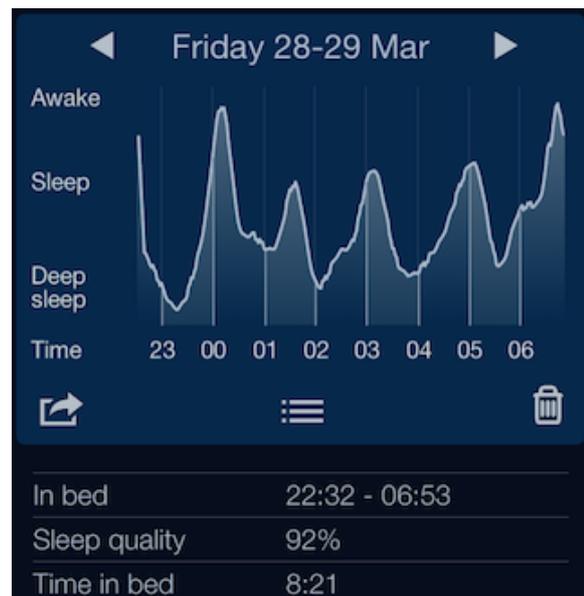
This may seem obsessive to some, but I have been a very happy user of the sleep cycle alarm clock for the iPhone by Northcube AB for over a year now. Its basic version [is free](#).

It analyses your sleep based on how much you move and assumes that if you are in a REM phase, you move very little. The "Deep Sleep" phases on the diagrams below indicate the REM sleep phases.

Here is an example of a bad night's sleep:



Here an example of a very good night's sleep:



My eight year-old daughter stays with me on Friday nights, so that is my secret to at least one good night's sleep per week - for now she goes to bed early and gets up at a reasonable time, a model for us all 😊

There are many other similar applications to choose from for all platforms, so if you are interested, have a look around to find what suits you.

Exercise

Do I really need to tell you this? Regular exercise will make you sleep better...

Massage

And last, but not least, I often get reports from clients that after a complete all-body massage, they slept "like a baby" during the night.

It is not surprising at all, since muscle tension will cause considerable discomfort during your sleep, so [keeping tension levels low](#) certainly is recommended.

Sleep well,

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