

Natural Health

WELLNESS + REMEDIES + BEAUTY



Optimize Your Sleep

Don't stay in the dark about how to create a lifestyle that prioritizes sound slumber.

SLEEP IS A BIG DEAL, a fact we're all waking up to. As research mounts on the benefits of getting a good night's rest — as well as the detrimental effects of sleep restriction — the sleep aids industry is growing by leaps and bounds, and is poised to exceed \$100 billion by 2023.

Whether you celebrate or bemoan sleep's rising star, the verdict is in: There's no badge of glory to be earned in skimping on your zzz's.

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The Growing Sleep Movement

First things first: A good night's rest isn't just essential for growing children. And according to Catherine Darley, founder of the Institute of Naturopathic Sleep Medicine, the most common sleep problem is simply not getting enough of it.

Seven to nine hours is ideal for the average healthy adult, yet statistics show that more than a third of Americans fall short of the recommended amount of shut-eye. An explosion of recent research confirms that the negative consequences of this extend far beyond feeling groggy. A lack of sleep is linked to impaired cognitive and physical performance, increased irritability, decreased pain tolerance, and even social withdrawal and loneliness — and that's just the short list.

On the flip side, there's much to be gained from being well-rested. Aside from the obvious benefit of looking and feeling refreshed, healthy sleep also makes us more empathetic, less vulnerable to rejection, and better at managing anger.

“After three nights of being sleep-restricted, people lose insight into how much they're negatively affected. It's analogous to being intoxicated with alcohol: You can't realize how impaired you are.” — CATHERINE DARLEY

Very few of us are true “short sleepers.” Many people are just good at compensating, until the health consequences catch up to them. To find out where you fall on the sleep quantity spectrum, Darley encourages tacking on an additional 15 minutes in bed every few nights, and to keep doing so until you wake up on your own without an alarm (an indicator that you've gotten enough rest).

Whether your sweet spot leans toward seven hours of slumber or nine, Ellen Vora, a New York City-based holistic psychiatrist, emphasizes the importance of sticking to a consistent sleep schedule. Because our ancestors maintained steady

sleep-wake cycles, delegated by the rising and setting sun, she says it's no surprise that our modern attempts at rebellion end in a struggle. Vora recommends settling into bed within three hours of sunset for optimal sleep.

“An earlier bedtime is the secret ingredient that helps strengthen your biological clock and cue your brain when to rest,” Vora says. “Starting at about 10 p.m., we begin to release the stress hormone cortisol, which can feel like a second wind. Going to bed earlier on a consistent basis helps you fall asleep more easily and efficiently, rather than battling your body.”

Make Sleep a Priority

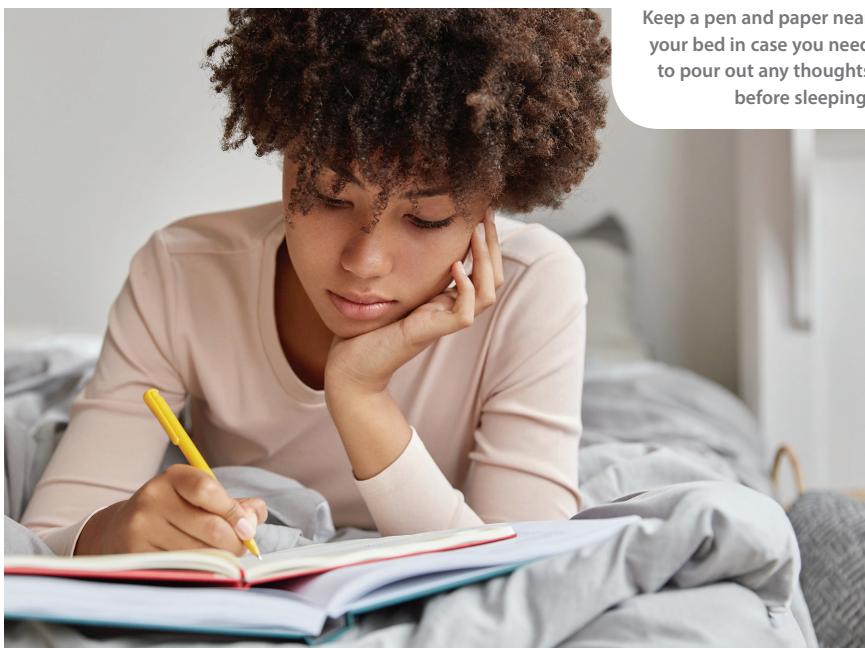
For many, the myriad benefits of getting more sleep are overshadowed by an unavoidable truth: You can't catch more zzz's without losing part of your day too.

For Darley, this begs an important question: Do you want to have a long day, or a good day? Committing to quality sleep means reprioritizing a chunk of time that may not be supporting your health in the first place, such as watching television or scrolling through social media. “Research shows that when you're well-rested, you interpret events as more positive than if you aren't well-rested,” Darley says. “To me, that means if you keep all the situations of your life the same — not changing anything materially, but just getting more sleep — you would feel happier with your circumstances.”

Suzy Reading, psychologist and author of *The Self-Care Revolution*, takes a similar stance: “At what cost to your health and well-being do you not allow yourself proper rest? What would happen if you committed to giving yourself the sleep you deserve? You don't have to love sleep, but do love what sleep facilitates.”

Reevaluate Your Mattress

In discussing sleep hygiene, we can't turn a blind eye to the actual beds in which we get shut-eye. Yet, in



Keep a pen and paper near your bed in case you need to pour out any thoughts before sleeping.

“Sleep hygiene” is a term for your collective habits and behaviors during bedtime. Unsurprisingly, most of us could stand to improve our sleep hygiene. Reexamining your bedtime habits is the first place to start if you’re struggling to get sufficient shut-eye.



part because of a tight-lipped industry where keeping mum on ingredients is the status quo, beds and bedding have managed to fly largely under the radar. Perhaps it’s also because our fluffy-cloud mattresses can seem so inviting that we don’t think to worry about cozying up to harmful chemicals.

While there’s no one superior mattress (it’s a matter of personal preference), opting for one made of

natural materials is a worthy investment for your health. In *Homes that Heal*, author Athena Thompson aptly frames the true payoff: “Creating a chemical-free environment in other areas of your life can be difficult, but just by changing to an organic bed, you can remove potential chemical contaminants from one-third of your life.”

So, what’s a savvy consumer to do? According to Tasha Stoiber, senior

scientist at Environmental Working Group, crossing a mattress with chemical flame retardants off your list is a good start. Though linked to a host of adverse health effects, from developmental problems to endocrine disruption, you’ll see no mention of the presence of these chemicals on mattress labels, so avoiding them requires a little research. Wool and polylactic acid (PLA), a degradable plastic, are two great alternatives.

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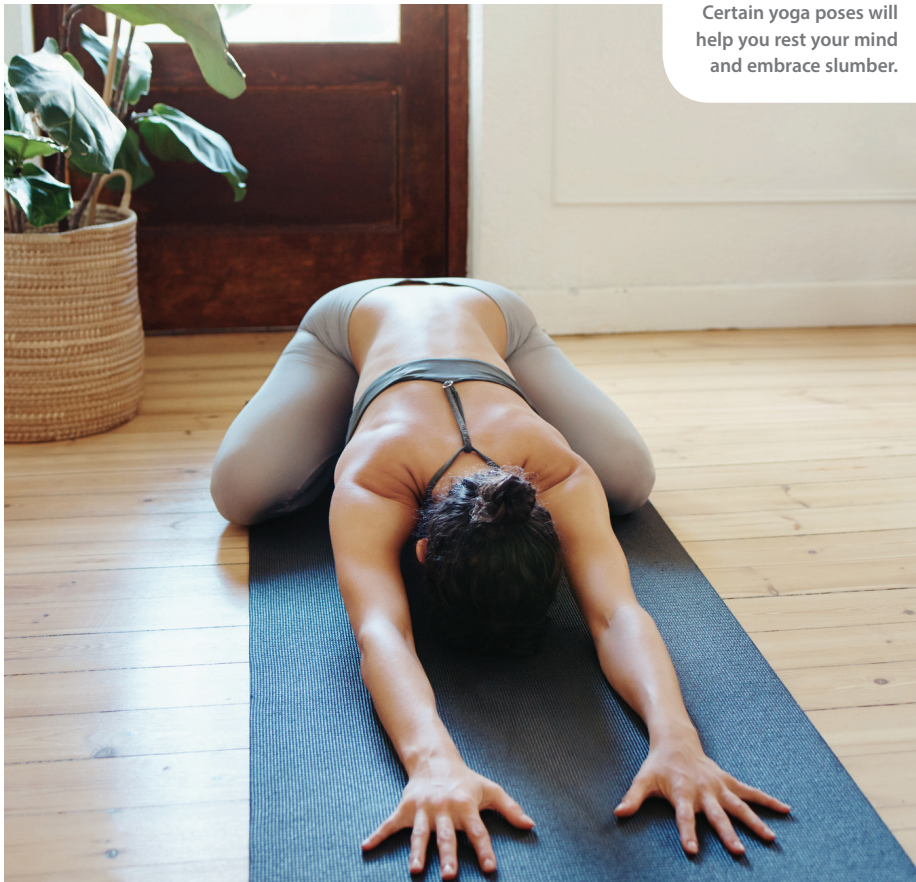


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Circle #14; see card pg 49



Certain yoga poses will help you rest your mind and embrace slumber.

Natural Hacks for a Better Night's Sleep

➔ Tossing and turning over your to-do list? Keep a pencil and paper by your bed for your thoughts so you no longer have to hold them in your head. Remind yourself it's not time for being productive — and that's OK.

➔ If you frequently wake up in the middle of the night, sleep with a flashlight by your bed to avoid the stimulation of flipping on all the lights.



➔ Refrain from eating a heavy meal 2 to 3 hours before bed, which can disrupt digestion and sleep. Consider light, lean snacks instead.

➔ During the hour before sleep, certain yoga postures, such as child's pose and pigeon's pose, can help you fully drop your day and let go.

➔ Chamomile tea is a research-backed sleep aid that can help you unwind before bed and improve the quality of your sleep. As far as supplements go, L-theanine, a compound that comes from green tea, is beneficial for promoting relaxation and inducing sleep.

➔ If you're too stressed to sleep, the popular 4-7-8 technique is an easy way to effectively reset your nervous system. Here's how to use it: Breathe in through your nose for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and exhale through your mouth for a count of eight.

➔ Place your alarm clock out of reach so you can't hit the snooze button, which exacerbates poor-quality sleep.

Stoiber also cautions against mattresses that use polyurethane foam, which can emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs) into the air and into the body. If, however, this kind of mattress is in the cards because of cost or convenience, you can still look for a product that's been certified to emit low levels of VOCs by checking for certifications from a reputable independent body, such as Standard 100 by Oeko-Tex or GREENGUARD Gold Certification.

Your healthiest option is a mattress made with at least 95 percent organic material, which could include wool, cotton, or latex. Latex, a renewable material made from rubber trees, is an increasingly affordable option, with the added bonus of being highly resistant to dust mites.

And, as with all purchases, be wary of greenwashing. The Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) is the only standard that certifies organic mattresses. "Know what you're looking for, ask questions, and call the retailer. Gather as much information as you can to find a mattress that supports your health," Stoiber says.

In addition to doing your homework, you'll need to maintain proper upkeep of your bed. Mattresses should be replaced every 10 years and vacuumed periodically to get rid of dust mites and other allergens. A tightly woven organic mattress cover can help reduce this buildup.

Create the Ultimate Sleep Sanctuary

We've set the stage for a cozy, chemical-free bed ... but what about the rest of your bedroom?

"The purpose of your bedroom is to be a place of replenishment," Reading says. "I believe outer order creates inner harmony. If you can

make your bedroom your haven, free of gadgets and clutter, it makes a difference in the quality of your sleep.”

Recent research from the National Sleep Foundation echoes this sentiment. A survey found that the ritual of making the bed in the morning encouraged relaxation and better sleep throughout the night.

In addition to this simple task, it can be beneficial to do a “bedroom review” to see which factors might not be supporting you. Again, there’s an intuitive logic to taking an ancestral approach. Consider what an ideal bedroom looked like before electricity: dark, quiet, and tech-free. An indoor cave, if you will. We’re also hardwired to fall asleep in cooler temperatures, so setting your thermostat between 60 and 67 degrees Fahrenheit will stimulate this natural process. For urban dwellers, blackout shades and white-noise machines can be helpful.

“Be aware of your levels of stimulation, not just in terms of caffeine and sugar, but also your visual diet. Nourish yourself in terms of what you read and listen to.” — SUZY READING

Just as politics have no place at the dinner table, your phone is on the “banned” list from the boudoir. Activating “do not disturb” mode doesn’t grant your device a pass, either. Our brains are trained to be vigilant and responsive to our phones, which interferes with the ability to detach from the day and drift into a deep slumber. Leave your phone at the door at least an hour before bed. Darley recommends having a simple battery-operated alarm clock instead. (And one without fancy lights or ticking noises, at that.)

Another reason your phone sabotages your sleep is because of the blue light it emits. As Vora explains, light is a primary factor affecting our sleep, and it’s what cues our circadian rhythm, “a system that worked flawlessly when we lived on the proverbial savanna, when light meant day and darkness meant night.” According to Vora, there are

plenty of ways to be strategic about light. One is to simply expose yourself to more light during the day. After sunset, your body needs to experience a transition toward dimmer light, and then authentic darkness at nighttime. (Learn more about blue light and your health at www.MotherEarthLiving.com/Blue-Light.)

Relax Your Way to Better Sleep

According to Reading, a common misconception is that the hour before bed is what “makes or breaks” sleep. In truth, our ability to relax and soften throughout the entire day affects the quality of our sleep. She encourages people to be kind to themselves in their waking hours to facilitate deeper rest when the time comes.

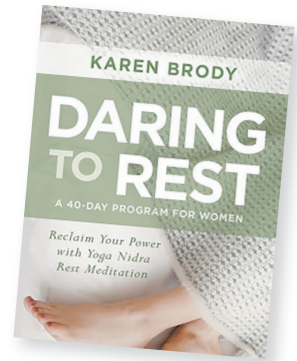
Often, ironically, it’s the worry of not sleeping that keeps us awake — we get in our own way! Reading encourages people to

use the breath and mind to reconnect with the body’s natural way of regulating sleep. Helpful affirmations include, “If I can’t sleep, then I’ll rest,” “I give myself permission to rest,” and “I soften into this moment. The world can wait.”

Rachel Salas, a sleep specialist at Johns Hopkins Medicine, says that, at the end of the day, sleep is incredibly important and no one can do it for you; it’s up to you to prioritize proper rest. “Sleep hygiene is not one cure, it’s a variety of habits that support both your sleep quality and overall health. It’s up to you to make sleep a priority, and to enhance your sleep environment.” 🙏

Hannah Chenoweth is a Baltimore-based writer who enjoys covering holistic health and wellness. Feel free to connect with her on www.HannahChenoweth.com.

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