

Tips to Fall Asleep Naturally

Get the nightly rest you need with these smart strategies.

Sleep has many important health benefits: It cleanses the brain, allows memories to consolidate, helps the immune system to function optimally, and restores and rejuvenates tissues. Not enough sleep impairs judgment and physical function. And let's face it, when tired, most of us can be rather irritable and grouchy. Serious health problems can result from poor sleep, including feeling more depressed and increasing the risk of falls.

Animal studies have shown that lack of sleep results in the buildup of certain proteins, particularly beta amyloid, which has been implicated in the development of Alzheimer's disease. During sleep, however, a very important system is hard at work: It's called the glymphatic system. Most active during slumber, the glymphatic system flushes out toxins and waste products from the brain, including beta amyloid.

Improve Your Sleep

"What we find helpful is the avoidance of excessively bright light, noise, and hot temperature in the bedroom," says Alon Y. Avidan, MD, MPH, Director of the UCLA Sleep Disorders Center. "Sixty-eight degrees is more conducive to the production of melatonin."

Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone that ushers in sleep. In addition to cooler temperatures, melatonin is triggered by darkness. Indoor light, including that which emanates from electronic devices, can be enough to inhibit its release. To induce sleep, create a dark, cool, quiet room and turn off all devices.

The Ideal Time for Exercise

Getting enough physical activity during the day may lead to better quality sleep, according to a National Sleep Foundation poll, which surveyed 1,000 adults between the ages of 23 and 60. Self-described exercisers



A good night's sleep helps improve mood and overall wellbeing.

reported better sleep than non-exercisers even though they slept about the same amount of time, seven hours. Vigorous exercisers were almost twice as likely to report they had a good night's sleep, and they were the least likely to report sleep problems. But don't do anything strenuous just before you go to bed.

The National Institute on Aging recommends that people exercise at regular times each day *but not within three hours of bedtime*. A little light stretching, however, can help you relax.

The Best Drink

While alcohol can help you relax initially, it ruins rest. According to Dr. Avidan, alcohol disrupts sleep architecture, meaning you may not pass through all the needed sleep stages, and that will inhibit good quality sleep. "Drinking alcohol can also make breathing more difficult," says Dr. Avidan. "It can turn someone with a little snoring into someone who has full sleep apnea."

Instead, try warm chamomile tea or any herbal tea, so long as there is no caffeine. Check the product's label to be sure. Do know that green tea *does* contain caffeine. Some people also swear by a glass of warm milk with honey, which can be helpful.

Treat Sleep Apnea

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is the most common form of sleep apnea.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Keep** your bedroom cool; 68 degrees is ideal.
- **Avoid** bright lights, especially blue light from electronic devices.
- **Allow** at least three hours between exercise and bedtime.
- **Don't** use alcohol as a sleep sedative; try a chamomile or herbal tea instead.
- **Treat** sleep apnea.

People with OSA stop breathing many times throughout the night and each time they awaken. It's subtle, so people aren't aware of it, though a sleep partner will likely be aware of the loud snoring, a symptom of OSA along with daytime sleepiness. Health problems associated with OSA include high blood pressure, obesity, memory loss and heart attack. The most successful treatment is a CPAP, continuous positive airway pressure, which features a mask worn at night. It helps you breathe better, sleep better and typically eliminates all snoring, enabling a sleep partner to get a good night's rest, too.

Establish Nightly Rituals

Take time to relax before bedtime each night. For some people, that can mean reading something (on paper rather than an electronic device is best), listening to soothing music, or soaking in a warm bath. Mindfulness meditation practices, such as a body scan, can be especially useful if you find yourself struggling to fall asleep. Bring your awareness to each body part from toe to head, take a deep breath, and exhale slowly while you invite relaxation. It may be surprising to discover how much tension you may be holding in your legs or shoulders.

People who struggle to fall asleep may find themselves becoming anxious before bedtime. Establishing a nightly habit that invites slumber might be just what's needed to overcome this mindset. ■

Common Heart Tests

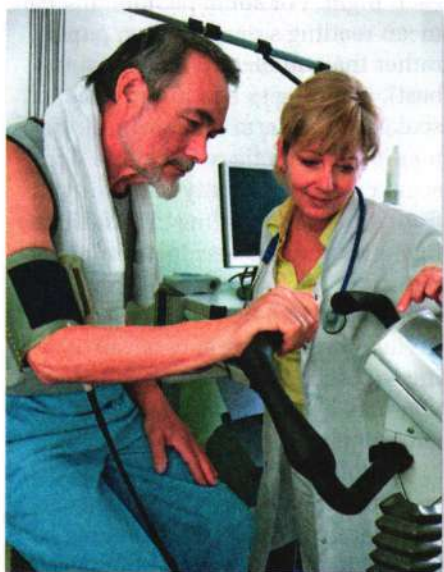
What these tests reveal and when you might need one.

In broad terms, the heart mainly consists of a plumbing system and an electrical system. There are two pumps: one uses arteries to push oxygenated blood from the heart to the rest of the body; the other pump uses veins to usher blood back to the heart and into the lungs to get re-oxygenated. Your pulse, or heartbeat, is controlled by the heart's electrical system. These systems can be measured with various tests to check for abnormalities. Given that heart diseases claim more lives than all forms of cancer combined, it might seem logical to get all the common heart tests possible as a preventative measure. But that's not what experts recommend.

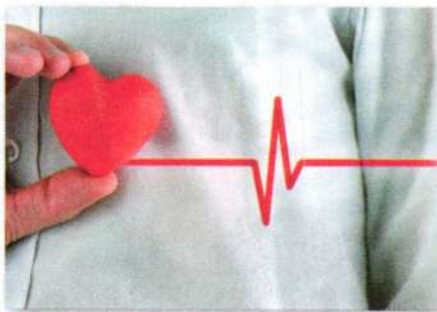
"There is no bundle of tests that are right for everyone," explains cardiologist Deena Goldwater, MD, PhD, Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. "The tests ordered depend upon a patient's symptoms."

Symptoms and Common Heart Tests

Unexplained chest pain, shortness of breath, and irregular heartbeats are a few of the symptoms that would indicate the need for a specific heart test.



Stress tests reveal how healthy a heart is for physical activity.



Tests ordered depend upon a patient's symptoms.

Electrocardiogram (EKG or ECG).

This test checks the heart's electrical system and heart rhythm. It shows how fast the heart is beating and whether its rhythm is steady or irregular. An EKG can show if the heart has been damaged by a previous heart attack, if there is a heart rhythm disturbance, an enlarged heart, or a valve problem. For this painless test, several adhesive electrodes are attached to a patient's chest, upper arms and legs, and all that is connected to a machine. The heart's electrical data are recorded on a graph, which shows electrical signals passing through the heart.

Stress Tests. The most common type of stress test involves walking on a treadmill or riding a stationary bike with ECG electrodes attached to the patient during the activity. The test is used to assess how healthy the heart is for exercise. It's especially useful after a heart attack, or after a long period of being sedentary. A stress test can also help determine the cause of chest pain because chest discomfort from coronary artery disease (CAD) is usually triggered by exertion. Some heart patients may be asked to repeat stress tests to assess whether medications are working, or if CAD is getting better or worse.

Echocardiogram. This test is typically ordered when a doctor suspects there may be a problem with heart valves or chambers. An echocardiogram uses high-frequency ultrasound.

A computer translates the ultrasound into a moving image on a monitor. To conduct the test, a technician spreads cool gel on a patient's chest and gently presses a device against the skin, painlessly sending the ultrasound beam to the heart. The test reveals the shape, size, position and motion of cardiac structures, including the thickness of ventricle walls, the condition of heart valves, or the presence of abnormal openings between the chambers of the heart. This test can also be combined with a technology known as a Doppler echocardiogram, which reveals how blood flows through the chambers and valves of the heart. It is a useful test when blood flow problems are suspected.

Coronary angiogram. This invasive test requires a thin flexible tube to be inserted into a blood vessel in the groin, elbow, or wrist. The tube is directed to the coronary arteries. A contrast dye is used with an x-ray picture to detect blockages due to plaque. The test is typically for patients who have stable or unstable angina (chest pain caused by decreased blood supply to the heart), or have had a heart attack, and their condition is not getting better. It's also for patients who are suspected to have CAD but non-invasive tests haven't detected it.

Risk Assessments and Preventing CAD

A lipid profile is a blood test that reveals how much cholesterol is in the blood. The body needs some cholesterol, but if it's too high, there's risk for developing CAD. Lowering cholesterol, and heart attack risk from it, can often be achieved through lifestyle changes, such as losing weight, quitting smoking, exercising, and eating a heart-healthy diet.

Understanding your risk for a first-time cardiovascular event like a heart attack or a stroke is important. Dr. Goldwater recommends seeing your physician to calculate your 10-year and lifetime risk. The results of this screening test can inform recommendations on lifestyle modifications or medications. ■