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Getting A Good Night's Sleep

One out of three of us has problems sleeping. Here are some tips to keep in mind during the day to ensure sleeping well at night:

Make your sleep environment comfortable. An ideal sleep setting is safe, dark and neither too hot or too cold. Install shades or blinds to keep out light and if needed use ear plugs to ensure quiet.

Develop a ritual for sleep. A routine before bedtime, such as reading or taking a bath, is a cue to relax.

Avoid caffeine late in the day. Caffeine lingers in the body for eight hours, disrupting sleep patterns.

Exercise regularly. Early evening exercise (at least three hours before bed) helps relieve tension and slows down the mind and body before bedtime. Exercising too close to bedtime has the opposite effect and may keep you feeling energized and awake.

Keep regular hours. An erratic schedule makes it difficult to fall asleep at night or wake up in the morning. Sleeping until noon on weekends can make it harder to sleep well during the week. Going to bed and waking up around the same time helps to establish patterns that makes it easier to sleep and leaves you feeling more rested.

Don't use alcohol as a sedative. Alcohol interferes with the stages of deep sleep.

More sleep is not always better. Eight hours is the maximum for most of us to stay in bed and benefit from it. Sleep becomes more shallow and fragmented the longer you stay in bed.

The melatonin "miracle"? Melatonin, a hormone produced by the pineal gland in the brain, plays a very important role in controlling sleep. It may be helpful in correcting sleep problems such as jet lag and insomnia. Melatonin production in the brain is inhibited by bright light, and drowsiness occurs when levels in the brain are high.

Food choices can affect sleep. High protein foods like eggs, meats and seafood wake up your brain, promoting arousal and mental activity. These foods are a good choice at lunch, to keep you alert and focused all afternoon. In the evening choose carbohydrate foods like pasta and rice to induce a feeling of relaxation.

You can boost your body's own natural production of melatonin by carefully choosing foods for your evening meal. Foods rich in the amino acid tryptophan promote melatonin production in the brain. Especially high sources of tryptophan include pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, baked potato, shredded whole wheat, dark leafy vegetables and milk.