

10 all-natural solutions for getting a better night's sleep

Learn how to get some shut-eye without prescription medications.

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Do you have trouble falling asleep at night but dread the idea of taking sleeping pills and dealing with potential side effects? If you're looking for alternate ways to induce the zzz's, here are some natural remedies that can help lull you into dreamland.

Melatonin

Mela...what? This natural hormone, which is made by the body's pineal gland, is available over the counter, and many health experts say it can safely help you get drowsy before bed (it may even have immune-stimulating and antioxidant benefits, too). But, as with all herbal and natural remedies, it's best to get your doctor's OK first. "High levels of melatonin may raise the level of another hormone, prolactin, aggravating the risk of depression or infertility," says Dr. [Jacob Teitelbaum](#), an internist and the author of "From Fatigued to Fantastic!"

"Although I don't know of any danger yet from using melatonin in higher doses, I would only use a dose higher than a half-milligram under close supervision of your doctor."

Awareness breathing

Does your mind race with thoughts and worries in bed? Your play-by-play of the day's activities may increase anxiety and fuel insomnia. Instead, try simmering your mind down, focusing on each breath and how it travels through your body. As it turns out, this type of conscious or awareness breathing may help you get to sleep faster, say experts. "Breathing techniques help turn off the mental chatter," says Teitelbaum. "Focusing on breathing is relaxing and a good way to disconnect from the stresses of life." How does it work? By following the air as it moves in and out of your lungs, your mind, which generally can only focus on one thing at a time, will be occupied with your breath — not your anxieties. And it's not as intimidating as it sounds. Simply take slow and steady — and deep — breaths, focusing your thought on the natural inhale-exhale rhythm, and watch as your body and mind calm down.

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Yoga

What can a few downward-facing dogs do for your sleep quality? A lot, say researchers. Past studies have found a correlation between yoga practice and decreased symptoms of insomnia, including one study from Harvard Medical School researchers, who found that daily 30- to 45-minute yoga sessions significantly improved symptoms for those suffering from chronic insomnia. In another recent University of Rochester study looking at cancer survivors, a demographic that frequently reports sleep disturbances, researchers found that the movement, breathing and mindfulness of yoga significantly improved the quality of the study participants' sleep.

Passionflower

This exotic-sounding herbal supplement is commonly used throughout South America for help with sleep and relaxation — it's even found in some sodas. "A number of studies support its calming effect," says Teitelbaum, who also points to evidence that the herb may have pain-relieving qualities, helping to control muscle spasms, and even menstrual pains. Passionflower (also known as passiflora) is available over the counter at most health food and drug stores that carry herbal supplements. Teitelbaum recommends taking 90 to 360 milligrams of the extract at bedtime to help with insomnia.

Total darkness

Of course you turn off the lights before dozing off (you do, right?). But if there's still a flicker of light in your bedroom, from streetlights outside, your husband's book light, the dim hue of the television, and so on, it may be time to make some changes. Researchers have long known that too much light can affect your sleep cycles, disrupting restful sleep. But now a new study from researchers at Ohio State University reports that too much light can disrupt your body's natural clock so much that even the dimmest light in the bedroom may lead to weight gain. Banish excessive light in your bedroom by turning off the TV, try to avoid falling asleep with lamps or even bright nightlights on; and consider investing in blackout shades (purchased inexpensively at any department store), which can eliminate outside lights better than blinds or curtains.

Meditation

When counting sheep won't work, maybe meditation will. Meditation — defined as simply focusing on a calming, peaceful image or thought — may help you get sleepy fast. Here's why, says Teitelbaum: It stimulates "alpha brainwave activity followed by theta brainwave activity. In effect, this is slowing down the frequency of your brainwaves, the same process that occurs when one moves from waking to light and then to deep sleep." New to meditation? It's a cinch! Just get comfortable, take deep breaths through your nose, and let your mind go quiet for a while. After a few moments, your mind may start becoming distracted (thinking of things that happened during the day) and when it does, focus on each breath to draw you back to a place of peace and calm.

Valerian

You've heard of Valium, a powerful sedative, but how about the herbal supplement known as valerian? "Valerian's effectiveness has been compared to a Valium family medication (oxazepam), without the 'hung-over' feeling present with most Valium medications," says Teitelbaum. "It is commonly used as a remedy for insomnia, and a number of studies show numerous benefits, including an improvement in deep sleep, speed of falling asleep and quality of sleep without next-day sedation." In these studies, the benefits were most pronounced when people used valerian for extended periods of time, as opposed to simply taking it for one night. Teitelbaum also adds that in about 10 percent of people, valerian may have an energizing effect. How much is safe? Teitelbaum suggests taking 200 to 800 milligrams of the extract before bedtime. "Most studies suggest that it is more effective when used continuously rather than as an acute sleep aid. It has a calming effect and can be used during the day for anxiety as well." As with any alternative medication, be sure to talk to your doctor before using.

Aromatherapy

Could the secret to great sleep be in what you smell? "Many essentials oils not only help you fall asleep quickly, they also induce a higher quality of sleep," says [Cher Kore](#), a Boston-based professional aromatherapist and instructor. "If you wake during the night due to noise or a full bladder, many scents may lull you back to sleep." Her top picks? Roman chamomile, which has a bright, apple-like scent;

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clary sage, with its rich, sweet scent; and the floral notes of geranium and lavender (all available inexpensively at most health food stores). "The best method is to put two to three drops of essential oils on your pillow, under the pillowcase," she says. Refresh the drops on your pillow every few days to once a week — about as often as you wash your sheets.

Warm bath

Don't forget about the power of a simple pre-bedtime bath to get you in a groggy state. "A bath causes your muscles to relax," says Teitelbaum. But it's what a bath does for your nervous system that may really help. "There are two main parts of our nervous system," he explains, "the sympathetic nervous system, which is the adrenaline part described as the 'fight or flight reaction,' and the parasympathetic nervous system, described as 'the old man after dinner.' Shifting from the adrenaline to the relaxed part of the nervous system is critical for entering into sleep, and a hot bath shifts your brain into sleep mode." It's best to take a bath before bedtime but give yourself about a half-hour before hitting the hay for your body's natural thermostat to cool. "Your body has to then cool down to go into deep sleep," notes Teitelbaum. Setting the thermostat in your bedroom no higher than 65 degrees can also help.

Progressive muscle relaxation

You're lying in bed wide awake, staring at the digits changing on your alarm clock ... now what? Try something called progressive muscle relaxation, suggests Teitelbaum, a practice that involves using the mind and body simultaneously to induce sleep. Here's how to do it: "Starting with the muscles in your feet and slowly moving up to your calves, thighs, pelvis, abdomen, chest, neck, head and face muscles, relax the muscles in each area, one group at a time," he says. "People find that they can induce a very deep state of relaxation using this approach, and often fall asleep in the middle of the process." You can practice this technique in any sleep position; the key is to pick one you are most comfortable in, then relax your muscle groups from there.

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