

# Before-Bedtime “Don’ts”



- **Social networking, gaming, and other stimulating activities**

Although social networking and gaming may seem like pleasurable activities before bedtime, these activities keep the mind alert. As a result, they are not conducive to falling asleep.

Avoid arousing activities before bedtime like paying bills, engaging in family problem-solving, studying, and working. Also avoid exposure to bright light before bedtime because it signals the neurons that help control the sleep-wake cycle, sending a message that it's time to be awake.

Also avoid working out right before bedtime. In general, exercising regularly makes it easier to fall asleep and contributes to sounder sleep. However, exercising sporadically or right before going to bed will make falling asleep more difficult. In addition to making us more alert, our body temperature rises during exercise, and takes as much as 6 hours to begin to drop. A cooler body temperature is associated with sleep onset... Finish your exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime. Late afternoon exercise is the perfect way to help you fall asleep at night.

- **Caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate), nicotine, and alcohol**

Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it can produce an alerting effect. Caffeine products, such as coffee, tea, colas and chocolate, remain in the body on average from 3 to 5 hours, but **they can affect some people up to 12 hours later**. Avoiding caffeine within 6-8 hours of going to bed can help improve sleep quality.

Nicotine is also a stimulant. Nicotine can cause difficulty falling asleep, problems waking in the morning, and may also cause nightmares. Difficulty sleeping is just one more reason to quit smoking. And never smoke in bed or when sleepy!

Although many people think of alcohol as a sedative, it actually disrupts sleep, causing nighttime awakenings. Consuming alcohol leads to a night of less restful sleep.

- **Heavy meals, etc.**

It is best to avoid a heavy meal too close to bedtime—2-3 hours is one estimate. Also, spicy foods may cause heartburn, which leads to difficulty falling asleep and discomfort during the night. Try to restrict fluids close to bedtime to prevent nighttime awakenings to go to the bathroom, though some people find milk or herbal, non-caffeinated teas to be soothing and a helpful part of a bedtime routine.

# Before-Bedtime "Dos"



- **Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine.**

After disconnecting from the computer, cell phone, social networking, homework, and the activities of the day, practicing a relaxing, bedtime routine conducted away from bright lights helps prepare the mind and body for sleep. Here are things you might include in a bedtime routine. Mark the ones you might enjoy!

Soaking in a hot bath \_\_\_\_\_ Drinking a hot cup of herbal tea \_\_\_\_\_ Meditation/relaxation exercises \_\_\_\_\_  
Gentle stretching/yoga \_\_\_\_\_ Inverting the Legs \_\_\_\_\_ A relaxing book \_\_\_\_\_ Listening to soothing music \_\_\_\_\_  
Keeping a gratitude journal and writing down a few things to be grateful for \_\_\_\_\_

Other ideas? \_\_\_\_\_

- **Create a sleep-conducive environment: dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.**

Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep – cool, quiet, dark, comfortable and free of interruptions. Consider using blackout curtains, eye shades, ear plugs, "white noise," humidifiers, fans and other devices.

If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping, omit it from your sleep environment. For example, if looking at a bedroom clock makes you anxious about how much time you have before you must get up, move the clock out of sight and set a couple of alarms to make sure you wake on time.

Make sure your mattress is comfortable and supportive. The one you have been using for years may have exceeded its life expectancy – about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. Have comfortable pillows and make the room attractive and inviting for sleep but also free of allergens that might affect you and objects that might cause you to slip or fall if you have to get up during the night.

- **Use your bed only for sleep, not for studying or working.**

It is best to take work and study materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment. Use your bed only for sleep to strengthen a positive association between bed and sleep.

- **Maintain a regular bed and wake time schedule, including weekends.**

Our sleep-wake cycle is regulated by a "circadian clock" in our brain and the body's need to balance both sleep time and wake time. A regular waking time in the morning strengthens the circadian function and can help with sleep onset at night. A regular waking time is important even if you haven't slept well the night before.

# If you can't sleep:

## **Don't *try* to fall asleep:**

Trying to fall asleep can be activating. If you are unable to sleep after 20 minutes get out of bed or go to another room and engage in a relaxing activity such as gentle yoga, reading, or meditation until you feel sleepy again. Do not engage in activities that cause you anxiety and prevent you from sleeping.

## **If you have sleep problems, seek medical attention....**

If you have trouble falling asleep, maintaining sleep, awaken earlier than you wish, feel un-refreshed after sleep or suffer from excessive sleepiness during the day or when you wish to be alert, you should seek medical attention. Be sure to tell your provider if you have already tried these tips and for how long. To check for possible sleep problems, go to the web site [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org) and to the checklist, "How's Your Sleep?" Review your sleep problems with your physician. There may be an underlying cause and you will want to be properly diagnosed. Your doctor will help treat the problem or may refer you to a sleep specialist.

## **Resources for Pitt Students:**

### **Stress Free Zone Sleep Support:**

<http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/counseling/sfzzzz-sleep-support-0>

### **University Counseling Center**

<http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cchome>

### **Student Health**

<http://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/shshome>

### **National Sleep Foundation:**

<http://www.sleepfoundation.org/>