How Do You Know If You Slept Well? 5 Tips to Improve Sleep Quality

A good night's sleep isn't as simple as getting the recommended 7 to 9 hours each night. Pay attention to sleep quality too.

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If you're getting a full night's sleep and you're still waking up feeling groggy and out of sorts, then there's probably another issue contributing to your poor sleep quality.

Thankfully, many of these issues can be treated with some simple lifestyle changes so you can return to getting the great night's sleep you deserve. Before we get into that though, let's take a look at why good sleep quality—and not just sleep quantity—is so important to our health.

Quality vs. Quantity: Why You Need Both

Sleep quantity is how much sleep you get each night, while sleep quality is how well you sleep. Both are vital to getting adequate sleep and feeling your best during the day.

In today's world though, sometimes that's much easier said than done. In fact, the newest State of America's Sleep found that most Americans slept either poorly or excellently, with very few people in between reporting average sleep. This has been exacerbated directly and indirectly by the ongoing pandemic—where some notable trends have arisen from people who reported sleeping poorly.

- Nearly 50 percent reported declines in their mental health
- 40 percent reported struggling with their financial health
- Declining physical health is more common in those who sleep poorly

People who reported excellent sleep have been experiencing the opposite, and have noted good physical health, mental health, and financial stability.

Healthy sleep patterns can help improve memory, mood, and help you feel energized to take on the day, whereas negative sleep patterns make your brain feel foggy, your body sluggish, and can even put you at increased risk of injury or accidents. Even one night of sleep deprivation can contribute to an increasing sleep debt that can take ages to recover from.

What May Cause Poor Sleep Quality

There's a lot in our lives that can contribute to subpar rest. If you're not sleeping well, keep an eye out for any of these factors—these are some of the most common culprits for poor sleep.

- Poor sleep hygiene or bad sleep habits
- Anxiety or stress
- Certain health conditions, including acid reflux, chronic pain, or lung disease
- An undiagnosed sleep disorder, such as insomnia or obstructive sleep apnea (OSA)
- Consuming caffeine or alcohol too close to bedtime
- A snoring bed partner

It's especially important to know whether or not your poor sleep quality is caused by an underlying sleep disorder. Many treatments that are normally effective will not solve the problem if a sleep disorder is the cause—you'll have to address that separately. (More on that later)

Signs of Poor Sleep Quality

It's easy to tell that you're not getting the restful sleep you need each night if you're feeling run-down and lethargic during the day. Your sleep pattern each night may be pretty revealing too. Here are some sure signs that your sleep quality is on the poorer side:

- You feel tired and unfocused during the day
- You have dark circles or bags under your eyes, or your eyes are puffy or red
- You're feeling more stressed out and irritable
- You take 30 minutes or more to fall asleep each night
- You wake up during the night, sometimes more than once, and lie awake in bed for several minutes

Don't Remember Your Dreams? That's Good!

Another interesting sign that you're not sleeping well is that you remember your dreams. In short, the less you remember your dreams, the better you slept that night.

During sleep, we move through several stages of non-REM sleep, followed by a stage of REM sleep. This is when your body processes memories, and also when you dream. Your blood pressure and heart rate also increase during this stage. Generally, the more time you spend dreaming in REM sleep, the less time you spend in the most restful stages of your sleep. This contributes to you feeling more tired and less refreshed overall.

Signs of Good Sleep Quality

On the other side of the coin, here are some indicators that you have a healthy, restful sleep pattern.

- You wake up feeling refreshed in the morning
- You feel energized during the day
- You're focused, clear-headed, and in a great mood

No pun intended, but the difference between good and bad sleep quality is like night and day! You don't have to live with bad sleep. So what can you do to improve your sleep quality and sleep better at night?

How to Improve Sleep Quality

Improving your sleep quality and feeling properly rested can be as easy as making some simple changes to your lifestyle. Check out a few of my recommendations to help you boost your sleep quality and get better sleep each night.

1. Follow a Consistent Sleep Schedule

A consistent bedtime is one of the easiest changes you can make to ensure you get the restful sleep you need. To do this, you just need to go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time every morning. In doing this, you essentially train your body to be ready for sleep at bedtime, and then ready to wake up in the morning. But what if you aren't sure what time you should be going to bed?

One of the best ways to find your ideal bedtime is to do it according to your chronotype. Your chronotype is your body's natural disposition to be awake or asleep at certain times. It's closely related to your circadian rhythm, which controls your body's sleep-wake cycle. Because of how their chronotype functions, some people are naturally inclined to be more productive during the morning, while others are more productive at night. Think "early birds" versus "night owls."

If you're consistently sleeping poorly despite getting a full night's rest, then it's possible you're working against your chronotype and going to bed at a time when your internal clock is trying to keep you awake! Once you know your chronotype though, it'll be much easier to adapt to your body's unique schedule.

To find your chronotype and start learning about your body's ideal sleep schedule, check out my chronoquiz.

2. Make Sure Your Bedroom Is Conducive to Sleep

You may not believe it, but your bedroom could be a reason why you wake up feeling tired. You want your bedroom to be the perfect environment for getting the rejuvenating, deep sleep that'll

help you be at your best. Thankfully, there are some easy changes you can make to ensure this.

- Install blackout curtains on your windows if you're sensitive to light— or if work requires you to sleep during the day.
- Consider using a white noise sound machine to provide peaceful ambiance, or to cover any intrusive sounds that can keep you awake, including snoring partners or pets.
- If you prefer no sound while falling asleep, earplugs are a very inexpensive and widely accessible option. If you want to block background noise and listen to soothing sounds then the Bose Sleepbuds II are the perfect solution.

3. Put Away your Electronic Devices

I always tell my patients that light is medicine, and in order to stay healthy, you need to consume the right types of light. Blue and white light from the sun are vital to your mood, mental acuity and in regulating your sleep cycle.

However, artificial blue light from electronic devices—including smartphones, computer screens, televisions, and even LED lights—is a major contributor to sleep deprivation. This is bad news, especially so close to bedtime. Overexposure to artificial blue light before bed inhibits your natural melatonin production and prevents you from falling asleep on time or sleeping through the night.

This can be prevented though! The best thing you can do to ensure your devices don't harm your sleep is to stop using them at least 60 minutes, but preferably 90 minutes, before bed. This gives your brain adequate time to produce the melatonin it needs to help you sleep. Alternatively, you can use blue light blocking glasses to safely view your devices before bed—I highly recommend them! Just make sure they have amber lenses for maximum effectiveness.

4. Practice Good Sleep Hygiene

Good sleep hygiene is very important to getting a good night's sleep. It doesn't just consist of personal hygiene before bed, though that is a key part. Sleep hygiene consists of all habits before bed, including what we do each evening to unwind before we go to sleep. The right habits can make all the difference between excellent sleep and another restless night.

Give some of these a try if you're not sure where to start:

- Take a warm bath or shower 1 or 2 hours before bed
- Write your thoughts down in a sleep journal, which can help you decompress and relieve stress
- Add some relaxation techniques to your schedule, such as breathing exercises, meditation, or yoga

5. Limit Caffeine and Alcohol Consumption

Because of its stimulating properties, caffeine is the most common pick-me-up when you're feeling tired and sluggish during the day. Be careful about that last cup of joe during your 2:00 slump though—consuming caffeine within six hours of your bedtime can actually reduce your total sleep time by over forty minutes!

If you enjoy caffeinated beverages during the day, be sure to stop drinking them at least six hours before bedtime. Alternatively, you can try caffeine-free alternatives to your favorite coffees, teas, or sodas if you enjoy them during the afternoon and evening.

Alcohol may not keep you awake like caffeine does, but it can sabotage your sleep quality in some sneaky ways. Alcohol consumption is often associated with sleep disorders like short sleep duration, insomnia, and circadian rhythm abnormalities. Alcohol can also cause or worsen snoring by relaxing the soft tissues in your throat, causing them to obstruct your airways.

When to Seek Help

Remember when I said above that an undiagnosed sleep disorder can contribute to poor sleep quality? Positive lifestyle changes can definitely help you sleep better, but they won't solve the problem if a sleep disorder like obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) or insomnia is the main cause. If you're constantly feeling bedraggled, exhausted, and groggy, a simple consultation or a sleep study can be the right start to get you back on the path of great sleep.

Contact your doctor or a sleep specialist to get yourself tested and to figure out any potential courses of treatment. The sooner you identify any underlying problems, the sooner you can start recovering. To find an accredited sleep expert or sleep center near you, I recommend this tool by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

When it comes to getting a good night's sleep, you need to balance quality and quantity. You need enough hours of good quality sleep to feel rested and rejuvenated. It's easy to tell when we're not sleeping well, though finding a definitive cause can be more difficult. Give some of my suggestions a try—you may be surprised at how much your sleep quality can improve!

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