



Getting the Sleep You Need

A large proportion of college students are sleep deprived, regularly getting less rest than they need each night. When students routinely have problems with sleep, learning and memory suffer. Motor skills can be impaired. It can even leave you more susceptible to illnesses.

Does Your Body Need More Rest?

If a significant number of the statements below are true for you, you may want to consult your class dean, a counselor at the Dartmouth College Health Service, or the Academic Skills Center about improving your sleep habits.

1. It takes you at least an hour to fall asleep every night of the week.
2. You can't get out of bed when the alarm sounds.
3. You worry about getting enough sleep most nights of the week.
4. When you wake up in the night, you can't get back to sleep.
5. You use sleeping pills or alcohol to help you sleep.
6. You feel exhausted from lack of sleep.
7. You sleep in or take daytime naps to make up for lack of sleep.
8. You get drowsy during the day, or need caffeine to stay alert.

Causes of Sleep Problems

Poor Sleep Habits. An irregular bedtime, frequent naps, late-night activities, or weekend sleeping-in can scramble your body's normal sleep/wake schedules. Insufficient and poor quality sleep often becomes a mosaic of cause and effect cemented by habit.

Emotional Stress. Emotional stress accounts for more than 50% of chronic sleep problems. Early morning wake-up is typical of depression, while feelings of anxiety strike at bedtime. Major stress can start insomnia or cause excessive fatigue. And sleep difficulties that begin with a single incident may linger long after the stress is resolved.

Physical Illness. Physical disorders are also important to consider as sources of sleep difficulties. Illness and accompanying symptoms such as pain, nausea, and shortness of breath often disturb sleep patterns.

Diet and Exercise Habits. Alcohol or caffeine near bedtime can have negative effects on one's sleeping patterns. A large meal or strenuous exercise close to bedtime can temporarily boost the body's metabolism, chasing away sleep.

(See reverse side for tips and resources in improving sleep.)

Tips to Improve Sleep

Know and get the sleep you need. Some students need only five hours, others need eight hours. Sleep without an alarm to determine your body's natural sleep rhythm.

Keep a regular sleep schedule. Wake up at the same time every morning. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, get up at that time as well, even if you go back to bed after ten minutes or so. Experiment with naps. Most students sleep better if they avoid naps, but some sleep better after a nap.

Fine-tune your sleeping environment. Noise, light, excessive heat or cold, drafts, air that's too humid or too dry, all can prevent sleep. To prevent clock-watching, keep your clock out of sight.

Exercise regularly, three times or more per week. Studies confirm that people in good physical condition get to sleep quicker and sleep better. Try to get in at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, five to seven hours before bedtime. Even light exercise such as walking can be beneficial.

Avoid caffeine and alcohol. For many students, caffeine interferes with their sleep. If it does, cut back or avoid it altogether in the hours before you go to bed. Alcohol, especially in moderate to large quantities, interferes with the sleep of most students.

Wake up early to complete homework when necessary, rather than studying into the late hours. Many students are more productive during morning hours than late at night.

Savor your last hour before bed. Some students take longer to wind down than others. Read a book for pleasure. Avoid television or your laptop. Drink decaffeinated tea or warm milk.

Deal with worries before bedtime. Review and write out concerns; consider possible solutions. Plan your next day's activities.

Resources for Improving Sleep Habits

If you are interested in talking to someone about getting the sleep you need, contact a counselor or dean in one of the following offices:

Academic Skills Center
Counseling and Human Development
Undergraduate Deans Office
Dartmouth College Health Service

Sources and Further Reading

Consumer Reports, March 1997, "The Search for a Good Night's Sleep"

New York Times, October 31, 1996, "For Teen-Agers, Too Much to Do, Too Little Time for Sleep," p. C2

USA Weekend, January 3-5, 1997, "How to Sleep Like a Baby"

FOCUS, February 1997, "The Scoop on Sleep"