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Trouble Falling and Staying Asleep?



I interviewed some of the country’s top sleep experts for science-backed tactics that actually work. These 6 tips have helped me get more (and better quality) shut-eye.

For something that’s as crucial for our overall health as sleep, too many of us aren’t getting enough of it—and the sleep we are getting isn’t as restorative as it could be.

In fact, only a quarter of women rate their sleep as “excellent” or “very good,” even though we’re more likely than men to say sleep is a high priority. Those of us between ages eighteen and forty-four are nearly twice as likely as men to say we’re “exhausted,” according to a report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And while we’d like to feel more rested, many of us view getting too little sleep as unavoidable—the price of being busy students, career women, mothers, and caretakers.

Yet here’s the truth: There’s a lot you can do to improve both the quality and the quantity of sleep you get, and the advice doesn’t just

involve tips you’ve heard a million times before (like avoiding screen time at night). Once you understand the many factors that can impact your ability to get a good night’s rest and learn some of the evidence-based tactics proven to improve sleep, you can pinpoint the challenges getting in your way and start to implement changes that can help you get the shuteye you need to feel your best.

For my book, *The New Rules of Women’s Health: Your Guide to Thriving at Every Age*, I interviewed some of the country’s leading experts on sleep. Here are the tactics they shared with me that have really moved the needle on the quality and quantity of shut-eye I’m getting.

Tip No 1

Vacation sleep will tell you a lot about how much sleep is ideal for you.

Most adults need about 7 to 9 hours of sleep a day, according to the National Sleep Foundation. But it's important to realize that sleep needs vary from person to person. While your best friend might genuinely function well on 6 or 7 hours of shut-eye, you might need 9 to feel your best.

How can you tell how much sleep you need? The next time you're on vacation (or during a stretch of five or so days when you don't have to set an alarm), go to sleep when you feel tired and wake up without an alarm, and keep

track of how many hours of sleep you average, says Shelby Harris, PsyD, a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in behavioral sleep medicine. If that's not possible and you have to set an alarm clock to wake up, play around with your bedtime to see what feels best when it comes to hours of sleep. You'll know you've hit your sweet spot when you wake up refreshed and feel energized throughout your day without having to reach for coffee or another caffeinated beverage in the afternoon as a pick-me-up.

Tip No 2

Get choosy about your before-bed screen time.

Even more important than the blue light exposure you get from the TV and other screens before bed is what you're looking at on those screens, says Dr. Harris. "If you're doomscrolling or watching something that's

going to stress you out or keep you hooked in—like your social media feeds, which are meant to be addictive—it's more likely to keep you awake longer than if you're watching something that relaxes you."

Tip No. 3

Try to resist “revenge bedtime procrastination”

This is a new term for an age-old scenario where you're so busy throughout your day that you get defiant at night, desperate to steal back some time just for you. Because many of us watch a favorite TV show during this time, Dr. Harris's favorite tip is to turn off autoplay on streaming services. “If you turn off that function, it forces you to make a conscious decision as to whether

you're going to watch the next episode, which is often enough to give you that little pause to ask yourself, ‘Do I want to choose sleep, or do I want to watch another show?’” says Dr. Harris. “If you choose to watch another episode, that's fine every once in a while!” But that pause will help you make it the exception, not the norm.

Tip No. 4

You can support your body's melatonin production without taking a supplement.

Melatonin is a powerful hormone that tells the body it's time to sleep and regulates the timing of your overall sleep-wake cycle. Inexpensive and easy to find, melatonin supplements are so ubiquitous these days that it can seem as if they're harmless. Yet sleep experts warn against taking them without consulting a medical professional. That's because you can't be sure how much of the synthetic hormone you're actually getting when you buy an OTC supplement. In fact, one study found the concentration of melatonin in more than 70 percent of supplements varied widely from what the labels claimed (from 83 percent less melatonin than the amount listed to 478 percent more).

Thankfully, there's a lot you can do to help your body's own production of this important sleep hormone, says Emily Manoogian, PhD,

a chronobiologist and clinical researcher at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies.

Here's where to start:

Spend fifteen minutes outside in the daylight first thing in the morning.

Go outside without wearing sunglasses (and without looking at the sun!) within thirty minutes to an hour after you wake up. If you can't go outside, sit by a window. Morning light exposure can help reset your internal body clock, signaling that it's time to be awake during the day and to sleep at night.

Work near a window during the day, if possible.

Exposure to daylight during the daytime, even if you're not actually outdoors, can go a long way toward helping you produce the ideal amount of melatonin (and at the right time) at night. "Just keep in mind that while direct light is good, looking at a window or getting too much bright light can be hard on your eyes," says Dr. Manoogian.

Spend some time outside during dusk, a few hours before bedtime.

Being outside in this natural low light signals to your body that it's time to wind down and prepare for sleep.

Dim the lights and eliminate all exposure to blue light at least one to two hours before you want to fall asleep.

Even very low lights can suppress your melatonin secretion, which can shorten the body's perception of night and delay your production of melatonin.

Stick to a consistent bedtime and wake-up time, even on weekends.

Going to sleep and waking up around the same time every day helps to regulate your body's master clock, which in turn improves your melatonin production.

Tracking your sleep using a wearable device may not give you the data you think it's giving you.

Here's something you may find surprising: Wearable sleep trackers aren't actually capable of measuring the minute details of your sleep, like how many minutes of deep sleep you're getting each night. They measure how much we move around while we're sleeping, and sometimes heart rate and possibly a few other metrics, like body temperature. That information is then used to estimate whether you're asleep or awake. And while these trackers are pretty good at estimating, they're not good at knowing what type of sleep you're getting (light, deep, or REM) or how long you're staying in each sleep stage.

"My patients will often say things to me like, 'My wearable tells me I haven't had REM sleep for six weeks,' and I don't believe it, says Jennifer L. Martin, PhD, a sleep psychologist, researcher, and professor of medicine at the

David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA. "Where I think a sleep tracker is helpful is if you're wearing one for accountability."

Trying to stick to a regular sleep schedule? A wearable can hold you accountable to those goals. That said, if you start stressing out because of the poor sleep data your wearable is giving you and it's causing you to lose sleep (a condition that actually has a name, orthosomnia), Dr. Martin suggests taking it off.

"The goal is for these devices to help you stick to healthy sleep habits, not to mess with your quality or quantity of sleep," she says.

Consider a “sleep divorce” if necessary

Sleeping next to a significant other can be incredibly beneficial—and in fact, it can create many positive emotional and physiological benefits that can help you sleep. However, if your bed partner is keeping you up at night (for example, if they snore), it could lead to sleep problems. In fact, women who are partnered with a snorer are three times more likely to have insomnia compared with women who are paired with a nonsnorer. If you’re struggling to get quality sleep when sleeping next to someone, you might consider sleeping separately—what’s being coined as a “sleep divorce.”

“For many years, there was no science behind shared sleep, so we just followed the shoulds,” says Wendy Troxel, PhD, licensed clinical psychologist, senior behavioral and social scientist at RAND, and author of *Sharing the Covers: Every Couple’s Guide to Better Sleep*. “Many of us thought, We’re married, so we should sleep in the same bed. We’re a couple, so we should go to bed and wake up at the same time. Now we know better.”

If you’re struggling to get quality sleep when sleeping next to someone, it’s important to identify what your issues are and then talk about how you can share important ritual time in bed without forcing yourselves to sleep in the same bed or at the same time, says Dr. Troxel. Using “I” statements is key when you have this discussion. You might say, “I’m not sleeping well, and because of that, I can’t be the partner I want to be.” With a statement like that, you’re not blaming or nagging; you’re setting the tone for how to address this as a “we” problem.

“And while the term sleep divorce has become popular, what you’re really doing is creating an alliance around sleep because it’s so foundational to the quality of your relationship,” adds Dr. Troxel.

For a lot more about sleep, including the different sleep stages, sleep conditions that impact women the most, and many more tips that can help you get a better night’s rest, read [The New Rules of Women’s Health: Your Guide to Thriving at Every Age](#).