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Wellness Tips for Youth: Improving Your Sleep

Sleep is a normal state that occurs quite naturally. It is also quite normal to waken briefly a few times in the night, especially as you get older. However, regular sleep patterns can be disrupted by a number of things such as emotional states, significant life events (e.g., trauma, change), and diet. Regaining a healthy pattern of sleep should be possible. The following list includes a few easy-to-implement ideas to help improve sleep.

- 1) Use Bedtime Routines.** Preparation for sleep begins 60 to 90 minutes before the sleep state occurs. Your night-time routine should be predictable and regular, including the same time, and the same activities. As you progress through your routine, *remind yourself that you are relaxing to prepare for sleep.*
- 2) Watch Your Diet.** Sleep requires relaxation. Stimulants in your diet can inhibit sleep by arousing your body physiologically. Common culprits include caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, pop), nicotine (cigarettes, nicotine gum), wake-up pills, diet pills, some painkillers, and stimulant medication (Ritalin, Dexedrine). Also, sudden withdrawal after over-use of depressants such as alcohol or anti-anxiety medication can lead to a ‘rebound’ effect that disrupts sleep. Things that can help to induce sleep include warm milk (which releases a natural sedative called Tryptophan), peppermint or Chamomile tea. Of course, watch that you don’t take so much that you’ll be waking up to use the bathroom!
- 3) Prepare a Relaxing Environment and Take Time to Unwind.** If you have a stressful home, school, or work life, take time to disengage before you head for bed. A relaxing environment can include soft lighting, gentle music, scented candles or incense (scent is a powerful trigger for memory and can help to induce a relaxation response if you associate a particular smell with being relaxed).
- 4) Take a Warm Bath or Shower.**
- 5) Listen to Gentle, Relaxing Music.**

- 6) **Use Relaxation Tapes.** These fall into two categories. First are the ones that have soothing nature sounds such as waves or water, bird or animal sounds. Second are those that have someone guiding you through a relaxation procedure such as visualization and imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, or self-hypnosis.
- 7) **Engage in Light Exercise.** Exercising gently or taking an evening walk 60-90 minutes before you go to sleep can be helpful. However, if you exercise *heavily*, you will likely have to do so *at least 2 hours before* you plan to sleep.
- 8) **Engage in Regular Exercise.** People who are in good physical shape tend to sleep better than those who are not. Regular exercise that gives your cardio-vascular system a work-out for at least 20 minutes is best. However, *if you have other health problems, consult with your family doctor or specialist before getting started.*
- 9) **Get Fresh Air.** Weather permitting; open a window slightly so you get a cool breath of fresh air.
- 10) **Start a Concerns Page.** Keep some paper and a pen near the bed so that if you find some concern coming into your mind you can write it down to deal with the next day. As you do so, remind yourself purposefully that you have written it down so that you will not forget it and that you can deal with it better in the morning once you are rested. Also remind yourself that *now is the time for rest*, which includes rest for your mind as well as for your body. In the morning, if other concerns come to mind (including dreams) you can add them to the list.
- 11) **Read.** Many people find it helpful to read before bed. This can be useful as long as the book or article is not so interesting or scary that it will capture your attention and keep you awake or increase your anxiety.
- 12) **Use Relaxation Techniques.** Deep breathing, progressive muscle tension and relaxation, imagery, meditation, and self-hypnosis are all effective and well-researched techniques.
- 13) **Don't Toss and Turn for Too Long.** Most experts recommend that if you are still awake 20-30 minutes after you have gone to bed, you should probably not stay there. You want to associate the bed with sleep and not with restlessness. Get up and try to work through a few of the other suggestions on the list to help induce relaxation.

If your sleep pattern is really poor and does not improve, then consult with someone, such as your parent, a family doctor, or a psychologist or other professional counsellor.