

Eating too much and working in bed: experts share 10 worst sleep mistakes

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Although we spend roughly a third of our lives doing it, sleep can often feel elusive. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one in three Americans sleep less than the recommended seven to nine hours a night. In the UK, a 2020 YouGov poll found that 18% of Brits sleep less than six hours a day, an amount experts described as “insufficient and unhealthy”.



This shortfall has serious health consequences. As Dr Alaina Tiani, a clinical health psychologist and associate staff member in behavioral sleep medicine at the Cleveland Clinic sleep disorders center explains, poor sleep has been associated with a decreased ability to focus, worse concentration, memory impairments, feeling depressed and irritable, as well as a number of physical ailments including a worsened immune system and disruption in hormone functioning.

Some of this is out of people’s hands. “There are social factors that impact people’s sleep,” says Dr Julio Fernandez-Mendoza, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral health at Penn State College of Medicine. People who live in neighborhoods with greater rates of violence sleep more poorly, he explains, as do those who work multiple jobs, or who face greater racial and gender discrimination. “Any social determinant of health impacts sleep,” Fernandez-Mendoza says.

However, there are some elements we can control. Below, we break down some of the most common sleep mistakes and how to avoid them.

Mistake No 1: not knowing how much sleep you really need

“People tend to underestimate the amount of sleep they need,” says Dr Kenneth Lee, medical director of the University of Chicago’s Sleep Disorders Center.

For adults, experts generally recommend between seven and nine hours of sleep a night. Still, this is a general guideline and there is a lot of individual variability in sleep needs, Lee says. Margaret Thatcher was famously said to sleep only four hours a night, and the actor Dakota Johnson once said she’s “not functional” if she gets less than 10 hours of sleep a night.

To check whether you’re getting enough sleep, Lee suggests paying attention to one’s mood and performance. Are you irritable? Having a hard time focusing on tasks? Nodding

off during the day? You probably would benefit from a longer slumber.

Mistake No 2: eating too much – or too little

There is a Goldilocks quality to sleep regulation, particularly when it comes to eating. Eating too much too soon before bed can lead to discomfort, indigestion and heartburn, all of which disrupt one's ability to fall and stay asleep. Similarly, eating too little before bed can cause one to feel hungry, which also disrupts sleep.

Fernandez-Mendoza explains that, much like our sleep cycles, our body's hunger tends to follow a daily rhythm as well. By eating three meals a day at roughly the same time each day, we can better manage our hunger and our sleep.

Mistake No 3: screens before bed

One of the most common sleep mistakes people make is staring into the glare of a screen before bed. The blue light that smartphones, computers or televisions emit can boost alertness and thus “potentially delay our sleep initiation”, says Dr Patricio Escalante, a pulmonologist and sleep medicine specialist at the Mayo Clinic.

There is some debate over just how disruptive blue light really is to sleep. But besides the light itself, the content we consume on screens tends to be overly stimulating – like exciting TV shows or your nemesis' social media posts – which also makes it more difficult to doze off.

Mistake No 4: not winding down

Often, people don't devote enough time to relaxing and unwinding before bed, says Fernandez-Mendoza. After dinner, people might work more, do intense exercise or socialize, “and then go straight to bed, as if our brain works like a TV that you can simply turn off”, he explains.

It's helpful to have a relaxing routine at the end of the day, says Tiani. “It is important to have at least 30 to 60 minutes to wind down and do something non-productive before transitioning to your sleep time,” she says.

Escalante recommends writing down what you need to remember for the next day in order to reduce worry and rumination and then consuming “some boring content” that will help you drift off.

Mistake No 5: napping too much

Naps can be a great way to quickly rest and recharge during the day. But only if they're quick. Nap for too long and you affect how much sleep your body needs at night, thus disrupting your regular sleep schedule.

“Shortening naps to half an hour is ideal,” says Escalante.

Mistake No 6: spending too much time awake in bed

Winston Churchill worked in bed. Marcel Proust wrote much of *In Search of Lost Time* in bed. Frida Kahlo painted in her bed. I occasionally order pizza from bed. And yet, despite these massive, bed-based accomplishments, experts recommend that we avoid using our beds for anything other than sleep and sex.

“The more time you spend in bed not sleeping, the more your body gets used to that,” says Lee.

Even if you wake up in the middle of the night and struggle to fall back asleep, Lee suggests getting out of bed and doing something relaxing and nonstimulating until you feel ready to doze off again. He mentions one patient of his who saves her laundry to fold when she's having a hard time falling asleep. "You're really trying to create that association of: bed equals sleep," he says.

Mistake No 7: not getting enough sleep on weeknights

Many of us have skimped on sleep during the week because we think we can make up for it on the weekend. But that's not really how it works, says Fernandez-Mendoza.

When you regularly get inadequate or disrupted sleep, "you accumulate a sleep debt", he explains. While the occasional nap or Sunday sleep-in may help, it's unlikely to make up all of it.

One 2022 paper in the journal *Trends in Neuroscience* found that, after one to two weeks of sleep restriction (meaning less than seven hours of sleep) subjective impairments such as sleepiness and mood "typically normalized with 1-2 nights of recovery sleep". Other functions, including vigilance, remained in a deficit even after two-three nights of recovery sleep.

Mistake No 8: keeping an inconsistent sleep schedule

The more we vary when we go to sleep and wake up, the harder it is for one's body to adjust.

"Focus on keeping a consistent wake time every morning," says Tiani. Ideally, this wake time is similar on weekends and non-work days too.

Sleeping in an hour or so on weekends will not totally throw off your body's routine. But if you wake up two or more hours later than you usually do, you could inadvertently give yourself what Fernandez-Mendoza calls "social jet lag".

"You feel the consequences when, on Sunday night, you cannot fall asleep," he explains.

Mistake No 9: drinking too much caffeine and alcohol

Caffeine and alcohol can both disrupt sleep, says Escalante. "Caffeine takes eight hours to metabolize," he explains. That means that your 3pm pick-me-up coffee could still be keeping you awake at 10pm.

And while alcohol can make you feel tired, it will not make for a deep sleep. One 2014 paper found that the consumption of large amounts of alcohol before bed disrupted sleep cycles and led to interrupted, poor quality sleep.

Mistake No 10: worrying about sleep

If all of these tips feel overwhelming, don't let it stress you out. Seriously. As experts explained, one of the worst things you can do for your sleep is to worry about it.

"It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy," says Fernandez-Mendoza. "If you spend the day worrying that you're going to sleep poorly, odds are that you will."

So try to relax. And maybe fold some laundry.