



10 Tips for Sleeping Better in the Summer

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Sleep better this summer

Whether it's the heat, the holidays, or just the summertime mindset, getting a good night's rest can feel particularly tricky between June and September. "School is out, there are more distractions and schedule changes, and sleep can suffer," says Sunita Kumar, MD, medical director of the Loyola Medicine sleep program. "And of course, getting comfortable can be difficult during the hottest months."

But paying attention to your sleep quality and quantity—and making an effort to fix any problems that come up during this time of year—should be a priority: Research shows that people with poor sleep patterns are more likely to carry around excess weight, develop chronic disease, and die sooner. Even just a few nights of tossing and turning can affect mood, concentration, and metabolism.

The good news? Summer's not all bad when it comes to sleeping; in fact, there are some aspects of this season that actually make it great for restorative shut-eye. Here's how to take advantage of those sleep-conducive qualities of summer—and avoid the sleep saboteurs.

Get light in the morning

Summer means earlier sunrises and longer days, especially if you live in northern parts of the United States. And that can actually be helpful for people with circadian rhythm disorders or

“night owls” who have trouble falling asleep at night, says Omar Burschtin, MD, associate professor of medicine, pulmonary, critical care, and sleep medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

“They may actually find it easier to correct sleep difficulties and get better in the summer because they’re exposed to light as soon as they wake up,” says Dr. Burschtin. “It’s a cue to wake up and be more alert during the day, and it can also set them up for a better night’s sleep.”

You can take advantage of this benefit by getting plenty of sunlight first thing in the morning—whether that’s walking the dog, squeezing in a quick outdoor workout before breakfast, or sipping coffee on your porch or by a sunny window.

Get your teenagers up and out, too: Teens tend to have delayed sleep phases, meaning they are naturally prone to staying up late. If you can expose them to light early in the morning, says Dr. Burschtin, at night their brains may shift into sleepy mode a little bit sooner than they would otherwise.

Dim the lights at night

Getting morning light is only part of the equation, however. In order to really keep your internal clock on a regular schedule, you’ve also got to get rid of excess light at night. That means limiting time in front of laptops, smartphones, and the television in the hour or two before bed—or at least making sure those devices are several feet away from your eyes.

“Nature will provide early sun in the morning to correct part of the sleep problem, but the nocturnal part is all about behavioral modification and avoiding light before bed,” says Dr. Burschtin.

Keep bedtime consistent

Whether you have kids or not, summertime can mean a more lax schedule: Many people take vacations, some companies offer half-day “summer Fridays,” and in general, there’s just more going on at night and over the weekend. That can make it tempting to stay up late and sleep in when you get the chance, but making that a habit could throw your sleep patterns out of whack well past these summer months.

“I recommend trying to maintain a regular sleep schedule that doesn’t vary too much from day to day,” says Dr. Kumar. “That’s especially true for children—and most children need between nine and 10 hours a night—but adults should try to stay consistent, too.”

That being said, it’s normal for schedules to shift a little bit in the summer for kids who don’t have to get up super-early for school. If this is the case in your family, aim for a gradual transition back to school-year bedtimes and wake-up times, says Dr. Kumar.

“It will be difficult to flip the switch and say, the day before school starts, that bedtime is now 8 when your kids are used to going to bed at 10 or 10:30,” she says. “It’s better to start

implementing school-night schedules at least a week prior to that, so they can get back into the flow.” (The same goes for adults coming back from an extended vacation, as well.)

Watch out for alcohol, caffeine, and late-night meals

“In the summer, there’s usually an increased tendency to keep your social schedule busier,” says Dr. Kumar. “That can translate into very late dinners, and to caffeine or alcohol intake sometimes late at night.”

But consuming either substance too close to bedtime can mess with sleep quality. Caffeine in the afternoon or evening can make it hard to fall asleep at all, while alcohol can disrupt REM sleep and result in more fragmented, less restorative slumber.

“Alcohol acts as a sedative, but as it leaves the body has the opposite effect and acts as a stimulant,” says Dr. Kumar. “It’s common to fall asleep with alcohol in your system but then wake up four or five hours later and not be able to get back to sleep.” Alcohol can also act as a diuretic, making you have to get up and use the bathroom throughout the night.

Ideally, Dr. Kumar says, alcohol should have cleared from a person’s system by the time bedtime approaches. In other words, try to have that glass of wine at least three to four hours before hitting the hay.

Even late dinners—without alcohol or caffeine—can have an effect on sleep: A full stomach can leave you feeling bloated and uncomfortable in bed, and lying down after a big meal could lead to heartburn, as well.

Try to stay cool

Heat and humidity can be some of the biggest challenges to good sleep in the summertime, especially for people who don’t have air conditioning in their bedrooms.

“If you don’t have air conditioning, it’s really important you have a fan that can move air through your room and that you can control the sun coming into your room during the day,” says Dr. Burschtin. Keeping shades down and sunlight out, for example, may keep a room from heating up too much in the afternoon.

For people who have air conditioning and also sleep with a partner, it may take some compromising to find the right temperature and positioning of airflow. “One partner may like it colder or may want more of the air blowing on them,” says Dr. Burschtin. “You might try switching sides of the bed or your position in the room, or one person may need more blankets than the other.”

Sleep in (and on) breathable materials

If you haven’t swapped out your heavy winter blanket yet for a lighter, more breathable one, that’s a good first step. You can also shop for sheets, bedding, and sleepwear advertised for their

breathability or their cooling abilities. In general, natural fibers (like lightweight cotton and bamboo) or high-tech wicking fabrics (like what your workout clothes are made of) breathe better than cheap synthetics.

This may be especially important if you have a newer memory-foam mattress, says Dr. Burschtin, as these tend to conserve heat more than traditional spring mattresses. Keeping one or both feet outside of the covers may also help your body reach its ideal sleep temperature, National Sleep Foundation spokesperson Natalie Dautovitch, PhD, told Science of Us in 2014.

Rinse off before bed

Crawling into bed after a hot day, it's not unusual to feel sticky and kind of gross—especially if you've got lingering traces of bug spray, sunscreen, or sweat (or likely a combo of all three) on your skin. For that reason, taking a few minutes to rinse off in the shower may help you feel more comfortable when you slip into bed—and may help prevent skin irritation, as well.

Plus, says Dr. Kumar, taking a quick shower before bed may feel relaxing to some people and can be a good way to unwind after a long day. But keep your rinse brief and lukewarm, she adds: Some research suggests that a hot shower or bath before bed can raise core body temperature and may make it harder to drift off to sleep if you don't cool off after getting out of the tub.

Head for the woods

Have some vacation days to use? Get off the grid and take a camping trip: Two studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder have suggested that a few nights in the woods—without access to smartphones or other sources of artificial light—can help reset the body's clock and promote longer, healthier sleep.

In a 2013 study, a week of summer camping resulted in participants going to bed and waking up earlier—closer to sunrise—than they usually did at home. Saliva samples showed their bodies also began producing melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleepiness, about two hours earlier in the evening.

A 2017 study found that even just a summer weekend spent camping was enough to shift people's biological clocks more in line with nature. And even if you're not the sleep-in-a-tent type, the study authors say you can still reap the benefits seen in these experiments by getting outdoors early in the day and minimizing artificial light at night.

Drink water all day long—but not too much at night

“People need to be aware of the importance of hydration in the summer, so drinking water is definitely a good thing,” says Dr. Burschtin. “But if you don't hydrate enough during the day and you have to compensate by drinking a lot before bed, you'll be up going to the bathroom two or three times throughout the night.”

That's why it's important to drink fluids consistently throughout the day, he says, so you can cut back a little in the hour or two before bed. "It's always better to be hydrated," Dr. Burschtin says. "But you should also understand what type of person you are as a sleeper, and how much fluids before bed are going to affect you."

Need to sleep in? Block out light and sound

Now a caveat: You know all that advice about getting up with the sun and getting natural light early in the morning? That only applies if you're also getting the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep on a regular basis.

If your schedule, obligations, or internal clock keep you up later than that most nights, the healthiest thing you can do is to aim for that number—even if that means sleeping in a little later than most people.

That can be challenging in the summer, however, when the sun comes up early and birds begin chirping even earlier. "If you're waking up too early because of these things, you might want to look into blackout shades that block light and sound," says Dr. Kumar. Devices like sleep masks, white-noise machines, or noise-cancelling headphones (look for ones specifically designed for sleeping) may help, as well.

"When we talk about good sleep hygiene, we talk about keeping your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet," says Dr. Kumar. "When it's time to get up, you want to open the curtains and let that light in—but until that point, it's important that your bedroom is conducive to sleep."

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