

# 12 Tips for Better Sleep

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## 1. Stick to a sleep schedule.

Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. As creatures of habit, people have a hard time adjusting to changes in sleep patterns. Sleeping later on weekends won't fully make up for a lack of sleep during the week and will make it harder to wake up early on Monday morning. Consider setting an alarm for bedtime, not just for waking up.

## 2. Exercise is great, but not too late in the day.

Try to exercise at least 30 minutes on most days, but not later than 2 to 3 hours before your bedtime. Intense exercise raises your core body temperature for several hours, and your core temperature has to drop for sleep to start, so a late workout makes it harder to fall asleep.

## 3. Avoid caffeine and nicotine.

Caffeine has a 5 to 7 hour half-life, so a cup of coffee at 2pm is still about 25% active at 2am. You may not feel it, but it is quietly blocking the signal your brain needs to fall asleep and stay asleep. Aim for a noon to 2pm caffeine cutoff. Nicotine is also a stimulant and tends to make smokers sleep lightly and wake up early from withdrawal.

## 4. Avoid alcoholic drinks before bed.

Alcohol feels like it helps you sleep, but what it actually does is sedate you, and sedation is not the same as sleep. Even moderate use suppresses deep sleep and REM, leaves you in the lighter stages, and tends to wake you up in the second half of the night as your body metabolizes it. You can sleep eight hours after drinking and still wake up underslept.

## 5. Avoid large meals and beverages late at night.

A light snack is okay, but a large meal can cause indigestion that interferes with sleep. Too much fluid close to bed leads to middle-of-the-night awakenings.

## 6. If possible, avoid medicines that delay or disrupt your sleep.

Some commonly prescribed heart, blood pressure, or asthma medications, as well as some over-the-counter and herbal remedies for coughs, colds, or allergies, can disrupt sleep patterns. If you have trouble sleeping, talk to your doctor or pharmacist to see whether any drugs you're taking might be contributing to your insomnia, and ask whether they can be taken at other times during the day or early in the evening.

## 7. Don't take naps after 3 p.m.

Naps can help make up for lost sleep, but late afternoon naps burn off too much of your sleep pressure. By bedtime, your brain has not built up enough of the tiredness chemical (adenosine) to feel sleepy. Keep naps before 3pm and under 20 minutes if you can.

## 8. Relax before bed.

Don't overschedule your day so that no time is left for unwinding. A relaxing activity, such as reading or listening to music, should be part of your bedtime ritual.

## 9. Take a hot bath or shower before bed.

This sounds backwards but works. To fall asleep, your body needs to drop its core temperature. Hot water dilates the blood vessels near your skin, which lets your body dump core heat through the surface much faster than usual. Your core temperature drops, and that drop is the trigger for sleep onset. Wearing socks to bed uses the same mechanism: warming your hands and feet opens up the body's heat radiators and helps your core cool down.

## 10. Have a good sleeping environment.

Cool, dark, and quiet. Light is the primary signal that anchors your circadian clock, and blue-spectrum light from screens and modern LED bulbs is what your brain reads as daytime, so evening exposure suppresses melatonin and shifts your internal clock later. Dim your lights in the hour before bed and switch your phone and laptop to night mode (Apple's Night Shift, Android's Night Light, or similar) on an automatic sunset schedule so it happens without you thinking about it. In the bedroom itself, block out light (even small charging LEDs), keep the room on the cool side, and ideally keep TVs, phones, and computers out entirely. If you tend to watch the clock, turn its face out of view.

## 11. Have the right sunlight exposure.

Morning sunlight is the most important signal your circadian clock gets all day. It tells your brain that daytime has started and anchors the timing of melatonin release that night. Try to get at least 30 minutes of natural light early in the day. If you have trouble falling asleep at night, this is one of the highest-yield fixes you can make.

## 12. Don't lie in bed awake.

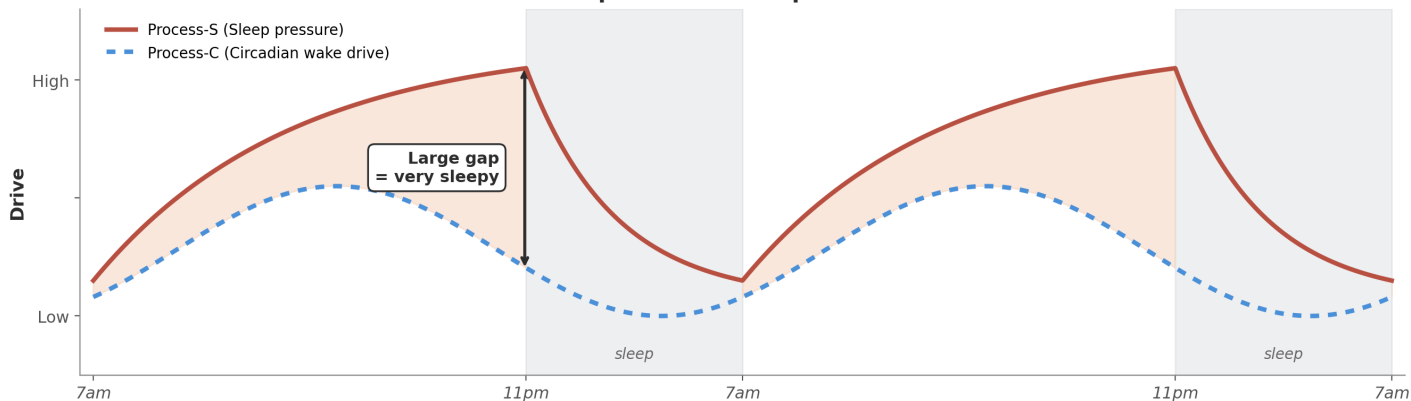
If you find yourself still awake after about 20 minutes, or if you are starting to feel anxious or worried, get up and do something quiet and boring in dim light until you feel sleepy. The reason is that lying awake in bed trains your brain to associate the bed with wakefulness and frustration. Over time, the bed becomes a trigger for anxiety instead of sleep. Getting up breaks that association.

A note on melatonin and sleep aids. Melatonin works differently than most people think. It can help you fall asleep a little faster, but it is not a sedative and the effect is modest. Its main job is telling your body it is nighttime, so it is most useful when you actually need to shift your sleep window, like jet lag or working an occasional night shift, rather than as an everyday sleep aid. Sleeping pills produce something that looks like sleep, but the brain often does not do the same memory consolidation and emotional processing it does in natural sleep. If you are considering either, talk to your doctor.

Sources: Adapted from Your Guide to Healthy Sleep, NIH Publication No. 11-5800 (NHLBI), with mechanism notes drawn from Walker, M. (2017), Why We Sleep (Scribner).

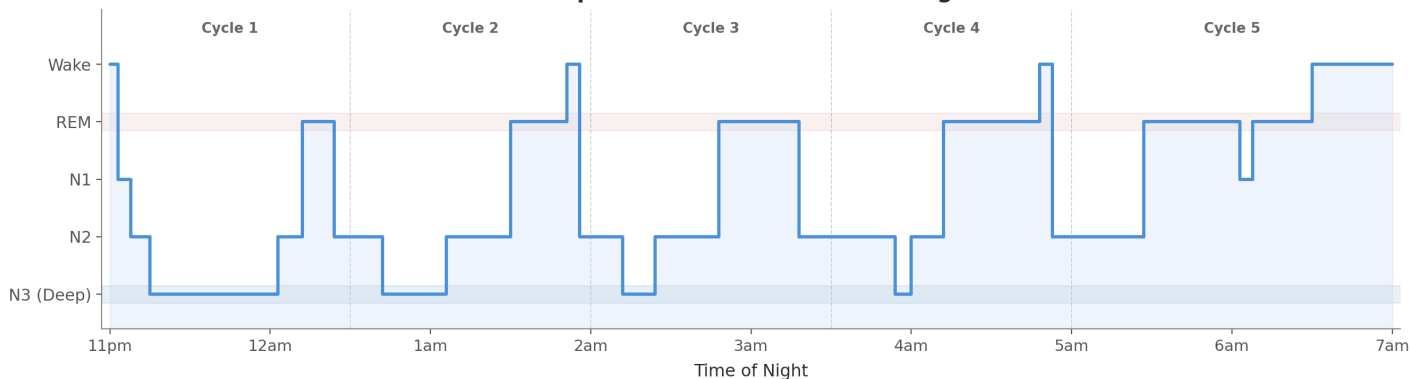
Stage	Name	What it does
N1	Light Sleep	Doorway into sleep. Muscles relax, brain slows. Easily woken.
N2	Stable Sleep	Brain consolidates memories and filters noise so you stay asleep.
N3	Deep / Slow-Wave Sleep	Heavy memory consolidation, growth hormone release, immune function, physical restoration. Front-loaded in the night.
REM	Rapid Eye Movement	Dreaming. Emotional processing (noradrenaline is shut off). Creative problem-solving. Back-loaded in the night.

### Tiredness = The Gap Between Sleep Pressure and Wake Drive



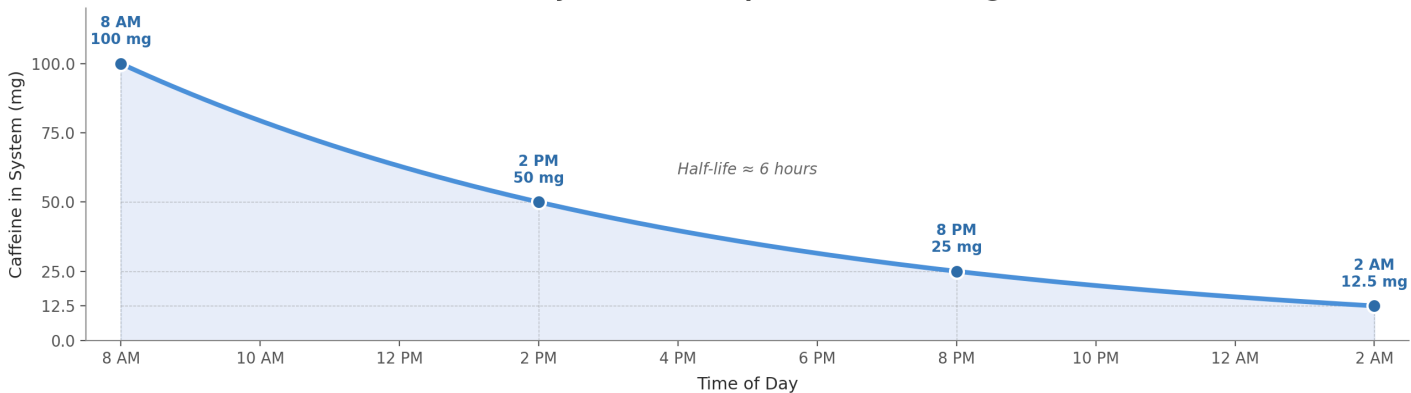
Tiredness is the gap between sleep pressure (Process-S) and circadian wake drive (Process-C).

### Sleep Architecture Across One Night



Five 90-minute cycles. Deep sleep is front-loaded, REM dominates the second half.

### Caffeine Decay After One Cup of Coffee (100 mg at 8 AM)



One 8am coffee still leaves 25 mg in your system at 8pm. This is why a noon to 2pm cutoff matters.