



Natural Ways to Fall Asleep Faster

Try these proven tricks when you need to relax.

BY DIANA KELLY LEVEY

AS YOU'VE FLIPPED through the pages of this magazine, you're probably beginning to understand that a good sleep routine involves setting aside time to prepare for sleep.

Here, we talked to Darria Long Gillespie, M.D., an ER doctor on the faculty at Erlanger Hospital Emergency Medicine and the author of *Mom Hacks* (February 2019), and Jennifer Reis, a certified yoga therapist at Kripalu School of Yoga and Integrative Yoga Therapy faculty and the creator of Divine Sleep yoga nidra.

"The number of people taking sleep aids has doubled since 2004," says Dr. Long Gillespie. "All of this, whether it's a sleep-aid supplement or a medication, can have a place in the short term, but these sleep aids are not really sustaining in the long term and can create dependence."

Studies have shown that lifestyle changes, sleep hygiene, behavioral therapies and behavioral changes to be more effective than sleep aids in the long term, says Dr. Long Gillespie. "I always start with lifestyle changes and

behavioral changes for patients."

"You can't fall asleep if you're not relaxed," says Reis. You need to retrain your nervous system to relax—which will benefit both the nervous system and your sleep, she says.

Follow these tips to set up your bedroom—and your body—so you can fall asleep faster. "Get creative with your sleep routine," says Reis. "Take the components and pieces you like and mix them together in a way that feels nourishing. Much of sleep is all about self-care," Reis says.



What You Need to Know About Melatonin

You can scroll through your phone until you want to sleep and then pop a melatonin pill, and everything will be fine, right?

“Taking a pill can never replicate the exquisite balance our body is intended to have with naturally produced melatonin,” says Darria Long Gillespie, M.D., who recommends checking with your doctor before taking any supplement.

“If you want to take melatonin for two to three days and you’re also making the behavioral changes discussed here, you can use it as a quick reset,” she says, noting that she’s not giving a prescription. “Take a small dose [0.1-0.3 mg] about one and a half to two hours before you intend to be asleep,” she says.

Keep in mind that melatonin is a hormone and can have other effects. It’s a supplement that isn’t regulated by the FDA.

Melatonin should be a short-term solution incorporated with healthy habits.

ONE HOUR OF YOGA NIDRA IS BELIEVED TO BE EQUAL TO FOUR HOURS OF NORMAL SLEEP, ACCORDING TO THE GURU SWAMI.

Clean Your Bedroom

“What does your sleep space look like?” Dr. Long Gillespie asks. “If it has lots of bright lights and it has your computer there and it has piles of laundry, then your bedroom is a virtual to-do list. Turn it into a place of rest.”

Make Your Room Cool and Dark

Dim the lights that you use at night—don’t go above 40 watts. You might want to get blackout shades or curtains and cover up any electronic lights before you settle into bed. Make the room cool. Block outside noise with a white-noise

machine. “Little things can make surprisingly big differences in helping you fall asleep faster,” Dr. Long Gillespie says.

Change Your Evening Habits

Examine what you’re doing in the hour or two before bed. “Are you sitting there, staring at your phone, on Facebook or Instagram? Because if so, not only are you possibly stressing yourself out, you’re suppressing your melatonin—and I can guarantee that you will not be falling asleep in the next two hours,” says Dr. Long Gillespie. Have a bedtime routine you stick

to every night. Put down those blue-light-emitting devices in the last hour or two before bed, Dr. Long Gillespie advises. Set an alarm on your phone to go off about an hour before bedtime. Use that time to prep for tomorrow (lunches, backpacks, clothes), then wash your face and brush your teeth and use the last 20 minutes to relax, stretch, read and go to sleep, she advises.

Try Progressive-Relaxation Techniques

Squeezing and releasing your muscles is a good practice to help you fall asleep. You could do the

entire body at once or work your way up from each foot to each leg, then your torso, hands, arms and up to your face. “Contract the muscles for a moment,” Reis suggests, “and then let them go.”

Implement a Body-Scan Practice

This is similar to the progressive routine mentioned above but doesn’t require tensing up your muscles. “Just lie there and systematically go through each body part, becoming aware of each one, from the feet up, while breathing...that really helps people fall asleep,” says Reis.

Do Legs Up the Wall

This restorative yoga pose helps you relax. Simply lie on your bedroom floor on a towel, blanket or rug and place your legs up along the wall, with your butt against the wall, making an L shape, suggests Reis. This inversion is thought to be good for calming the mind and helping the body get ready for sleep.

Add Essential Oils to Your Routine

Research published in *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* showed that inhaling essential oil has a positive effect on sleep. Any of the tree oils—like cedar wood,

sandalwood, or pine—may help you feel more relaxed. Consider adding a few drops to a tissue and placing it inside your pillowcase so that the scent wafts up while you snooze.

Try Yoga Nidra to Fall Asleep

Nidra is the Sanskrit word for sleep, and yoga nidra, or yogic sleep, is a conscious relaxation technique. This practice retrains your nervous-system time to relax every day—particularly at the time when you want to sleep, explains Reis. “When your head hits the pillow, your nervous system says, ‘Hey, I remember this, let’s relax now,’ and then the nervous system relaxes as well,” she says. All you need is 15 or 20 minutes, she states.

You could listen to a yoga nidra practice through an app—check out Insight or Yoga Nidra—when you’re lying in bed trying to fall asleep or, if you wake up in the middle of the night, press play and do this practice. It can help with insomnia, says Reis.

Count Your Exhales

Start counting backward, just your exhalations. Begin with any number you choose—100, 50,

20—and just count the exhalations in your mind. “The exhalation puts your body in parasympathetic nervous-system mode,” says Reis. “That’s the relaxation mode. The inhale is the active mode. Inhaling is rejuvenating; it’s during the exhale that people fall asleep,” she says.

Massage Your Ears

Self-massage is thought to help promote sleep, and Reis suggests gently rubbing your earlobes and feet to relax the body, according to Ayurvedic beliefs. The ears and feet have maps that connect to all parts of the body, she says. You could also rub them with a body oil or an essential oil mixed with sesame or coconut oil.

Consider Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Try these natural sleep-aid techniques first to see if they work and you’re able to fall asleep faster. If you don’t think they’re working, consider working with a therapist who specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). If you can’t afford to see a therapist in person, look into an app that offers these services. A few to check out are: What’s Up, Mood Kit, TalkSpace and CBT Thought Record Diary.

“Some of them are free. A lot of them cost some money. Your employer might even help pay for the app or a mental health expert, depending on who you work for,” suggests Dr. Long Gillespie. She adds that CBT can help how you think about sleep and reframe those moments where you’re lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, and you can’t fall asleep.