

How Your Daily Habits Affect Sleep

Why the Way You Breathe During the Day Matters at Night

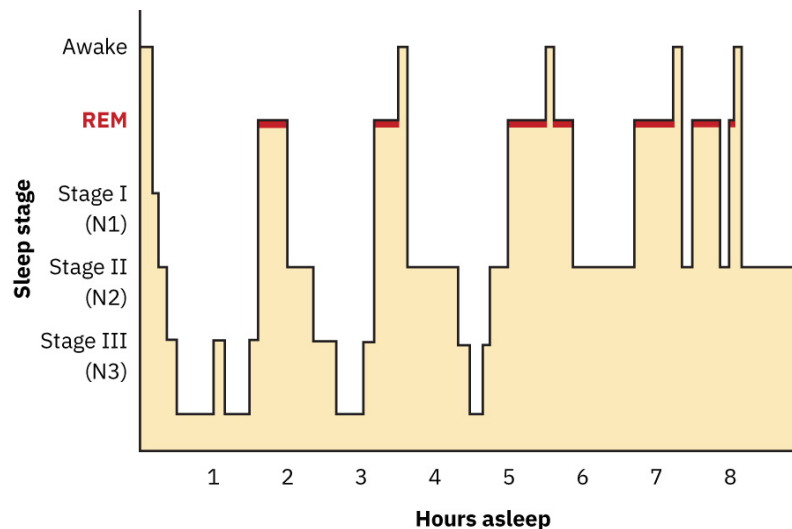
Most people think of sleep as something that happens only at night, but the foundations for good sleep are built throughout the day. Your breathing habits, movement levels, light exposure and ability to manage stress all influence how easily you fall asleep, how deeply you sleep and how refreshed you feel when you wake.

Poor sleep can affect mood, concentration, energy levels, immune function and physical health. Equally, poor breathing habits can contribute to disrupted sleep, creating a cycle that can be difficult to break.

The good news is that small changes to your daytime habits can have a significant impact on the quality of your sleep.

Understanding Sleep Cycles

Sleep is not a passive state. Throughout the night, your brain cycles through different stages of sleep, each with an important role.



Stage 1 (N1) is the lightest stage of sleep and occurs as a person first falls asleep.

Stage 2 (N2) is where the body starts to relax more deeply. Body temperature drops, muscles relax, and heart and breathing rate slow.

Stage 3 (N3 or deep sleep) is the deepest and more restorative sleep, allowing the body to recover and grow.

Stage 4 (REM Sleep) is where most dreaming occurs, brain activity increases, and the body becomes temporarily paralysed.

A typical adult moves through several sleep cycles each night, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Disruptions caused by stress, poor breathing, frequent waking or an overactive nervous system can prevent you from spending enough time in the deeper, more restorative stages.

How Breathing Affects Sleep

Many people who struggle with sleep also have dysfunctional breathing habits during the day.

When breathing becomes habitually fast, shallow or inefficient, Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) levels can fall below optimal levels. Over time, some individuals develop an increased sensitivity to changes in CO₂. This means that even small rises in CO₂ during sleep, which occur as the body is transitioning into slower more relaxed breathing patterns, may trigger the brain to increase breathing causing the person to wake or create a sense of unrest. During REM sleep, when breathing patterns naturally become more irregular, this can affect unconscious brain activity and may contribute to intense dreams, including nightmares, as well as a sense of unrefreshing sleep.

Poor breathing patterns can keep the body in a state of alertness, even when there is no immediate danger. By improving breathing habits during the day, many people find they feel calmer, fall asleep more easily and experience better quality sleep.

Circadian Rhythms: Your Internal Body Clock

Your circadian rhythm is the body's internal 24-hour clock that regulates sleep, alertness, hormone release, body temperature and digestion.

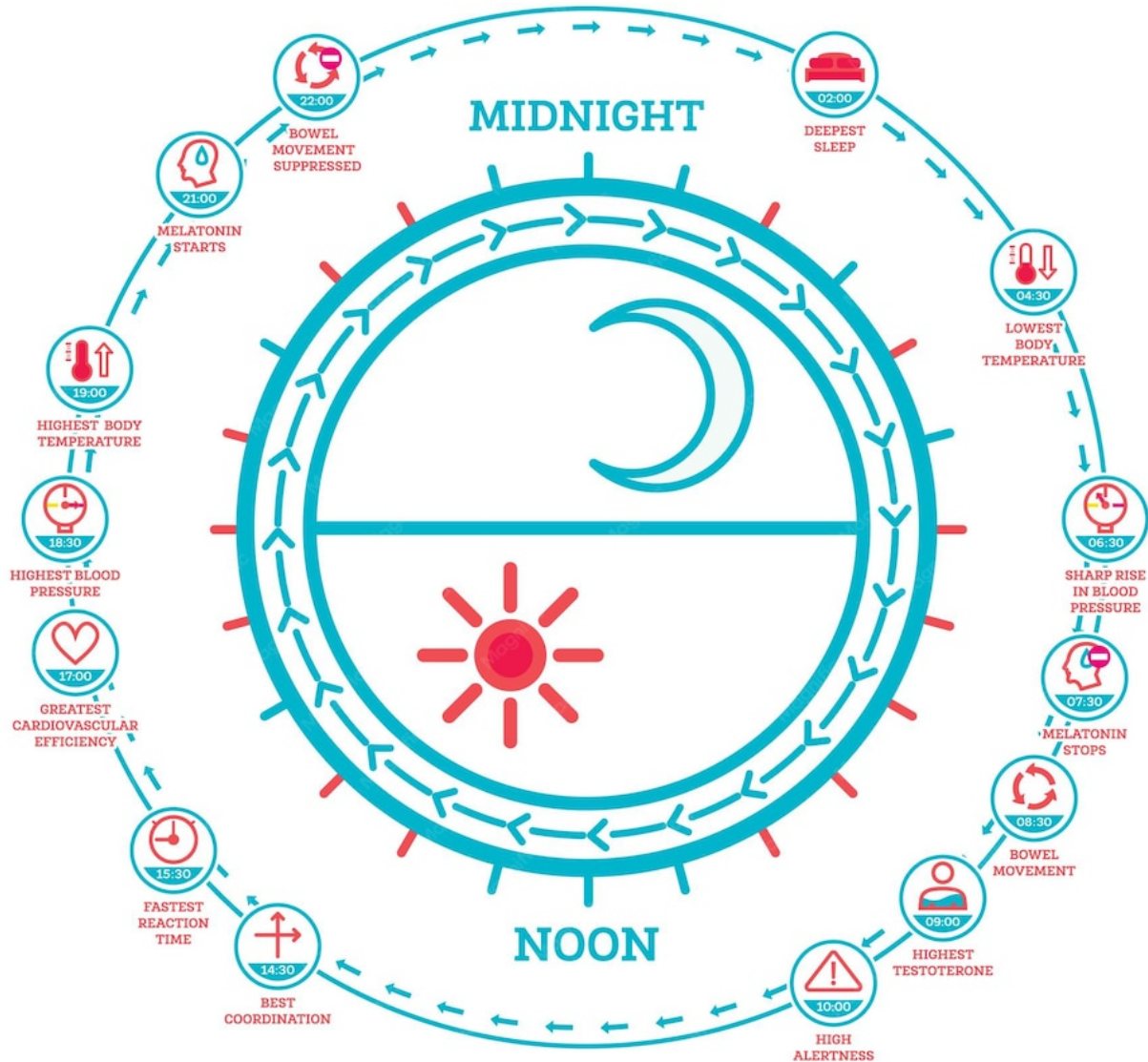
It is primarily controlled by the brain but is strongly influenced by environmental cues, especially light, activity and routine.

During the day, exposure to natural light signals to the brain that it is time to be awake and alert. This helps regulate cortisol (a wakefulness hormone) and suppresses melatonin (the sleep hormone).

As evening approaches and light levels decrease, the brain begins to increase melatonin production, preparing the body for sleep.

At night, body temperature drops, alertness decreases and the nervous system gradually shifts into a more restorative state.

CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS



Building Healthy Sleep Habits

Good sleep rarely depends on a single factor. Instead, it is influenced by a collection of daily habits.

Get Morning Daylight

Exposure to natural daylight soon after waking is one of the most powerful ways to support healthy sleep.

Morning light helps regulate your circadian rhythm. It sends a signal to the brain that it is

daytime, helping to set the timing for melatonin release later that evening.

Aim for:

- 10–20 minutes of outdoor daylight within the first hour of waking
- More time outside on cloudy days
- Natural light rather than light through a window

This simple habit can improve sleep timing, alertness and energy levels throughout the day.

Move Your Body During the Day

Physical activity helps create what sleep scientists call "sleep pressure."

The longer we are awake and active, the greater our drive for sleep becomes.

Movement can:

- Increase sleep pressure
- Improve mood and stress resilience
- Support deeper sleep stages
- Reduce restlessness

This does not need to involve intense exercise. Walking, gardening, cycling, dancing, strength training or any enjoyable movement can be beneficial.

Where possible, include regular movement throughout the day rather than remaining sedentary for long periods.

Reduce Sympathetic Arousal

Modern life often keeps us in a state of low-level stress.

Emails, deadlines, notifications, family responsibilities and constant stimulation can all keep the nervous system activated long after the day has ended.

To sleep well, the body needs to shift from a sympathetic (fight, flight or freeze) state into a parasympathetic (rest, digest and recover) state.

Creating a calming evening routine can help signal to the brain that it is safe to switch off.

Simple Breathing Practices for Better Sleep

Once you have optimised your breathing during the day then these techniques can help you to fall asleep at night. They use slow, gentle, diaphragmatic breathing which will stimulate your parasympathetic nervous system and help your body and mind relax.

Slow nasal breathing with an extended exhale

Lie on your back or side and breathe gently in and out through your nose.

Aim for:

- Soft inhale (a count of 4-5)
- Slightly longer exhale (a count of 6-8)
- Relax your body as you exhale

The goal is to slow the breath, not to take bigger breaths. The longer exhale helps shift the body toward a more relaxed state. Keep it light and quiet.

Physiological Sigh

- Inhale through the nose until you feel full
- Then take a second small top-up inhale
- Then a long, slow exhale through the mouth or nose and completely relax the body
- Repeat 2-5 times

Body-focused nasal breathing

As you lie in bed, shift attention to:

- The feeling of air moving gently at the nostrils - cool air coming in and warm air flowing out
- The rise and fall of the lower ribs
- Relax the whole body as the ribs fall

If your mind wanders, just return attention to the nostrils.

Sleep Hygiene Tips

Good sleep hygiene helps create the right conditions for sleep.

Consider:

- ✓ Keeping a consistent sleep and wake time
- ✓ Making your bedroom dark, cool and quiet
- ✓ Reducing caffeine later in the day
- ✓ Limiting alcohol close to bedtime
- ✓ Avoiding heavy meals immediately before bed
- ✓ Reducing screen use in the hour before sleep
- ✓ Developing a calming bedtime routine

Remember that sleep is a natural biological process. The goal is not to force sleep, but to create the conditions in which sleep can occur more easily.