

Tips For Resetting Your Sleep Patterns

Many people find themselves getting off track when it comes to a healthy sleep schedule, whether it's due to a little too much caffeine, stress or something else entirely," says Dr. Dena Nader, physician and regional medical director with MedExpress Urgent Care. "While there's no one-size-fits-all solution, there are a few things people can do to get back to a more regular schedule."

Get back in tune with your circadian rhythm.

The body relies on light and dark cues to regulate its circadian rhythm, which indicates when it's time to wind down and wake up. Just as it's easier to drift off in a dark room, a bright environment is equally important for waking up.

Turn off electronics, which can emit bright light, about an hour before going to bed.

When it's time to wake up, try incorporating some natural light as soon as possible to signal to the body that it's time to start the day. For instance, you might open the blinds as soon as you wake up.

Ease into a sleep schedule.

One of the main causes of an off-track sleep schedule is going to bed and waking up at different times of day. According to Dr. Nader, the best way to re-establish a healthy sleeping pattern is to create a sleep schedule and then stick to it, even on the weekends.

"Try picking a time that you'd like to go to sleep at every night, and slowly work your way up to it so your body can easily adjust to the time difference," she suggests. "For example, if you want to go to bed at 10 p.m. instead of 11 p.m., try going to bed 15 minutes earlier each week until you reach your goal."

Institute a caffeine curfew.

Limit the amount of caffeine consumed in the evenings. Caffeine can stay in your system for up to eight hours, so try to drink your last cup of coffee, tea or soda early- to mid-afternoon.

In addition to cutting out caffeine, studies have shown that meal timing plays a part in regulating sleep/wake cycles. It is best to eat dinner at least two or three hours before bedtime.

Just say no to naps.

If you're a regular napper, you might consider skipping those siestas. "Taking naps during the day can hinder the development of healthy nighttime sleeping habits," Dr. Nader warns. "While a power nap can leave you feeling refreshed, napping at the wrong time may cause you to sleep more poorly at night." If you absolutely need a nap, try to take it between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m., and keep it on the short side, perhaps 30 minutes or less.

Go clock-blind.

Once you've turned in for the night, turn your clock around and tuck your phone away until your alarm goes off. If you're having trouble falling asleep or if you wake up in the middle of the night, checking the time can cause anxiety and make it even more difficult to drift back off.

If you've tried various strategies but are still struggling to get back on track, it's best to talk with your physician to get a referral to a sleep doctor about delayed sleep phase (late bedtime with late wake time) and advanced sleep phase (early bedtime with early wake time). If you suffer from delayed sleep phase, **melatonin** could help your body adjust to a healthier bedtime. Be sure to talk with your doctor to determine whether this is the right choice for you.