

Tired of being tired? Try these simple, effective practices from yoga and ayurveda to help you

Getting the Sleep of Your Dreams

9 Ways to Beat Insomnia

We are a sleep-starved nation.

Sixty-three percent of American adults do not get eight hours of sleep at night, about 70 million suffer from insomnia, and according to the National Sleep Foundation, nearly seven out of ten report frequent sleeping problems—although most remain undiagnosed.

Alarmed? You should be. As Stanford University “sleep-debt” expert William C. Dement, MD, PhD, warns:

“Lost sleep accumulates as a debt that must be repaid or health eventually deteriorates.” This year, the Institute of Medicine released a report linking sleep disorders and sleep deprivation to a host of ills, including an increased risk of hypertension, diabetes, obesity, depression, heart attack, and stroke. ¶ Scientists are confirming what yogis and ayurvedic physicians have reported for centuries: deep sleep rests the body *and* the mind. Our daily dose of shut-eye regulates our weight, strengthens our immunity, protects our cardiovascular health, repairs our tissues and cells, and restores our energy. Sleep also allows us to process, consolidate, and retain new memories; it balances our emotions, makes us better problem solvers, and feeds our creativity.

A woman with blonde hair is sleeping peacefully in a bed. She is wearing a green lace-trimmed top. The bed is covered with a white duvet and pillows featuring a large, detailed floral pattern of red and pink roses and smaller yellow flowers. A striped pillow with pink and green stripes is visible behind her head. The overall scene is soft and serene, suggesting a high-quality sleep environment.

relax, sleep better, and ultimately, live better.

By SHANNON SEXTON

LESS DREAM TIME *In 1910 most people slept about nine hours a night. Today, surveys show that most Americans sleep less than seven.*

Happiness and misery, obesity and leanness, strength and weakness, sexual vigor and impotence,

But according to yoga, deep, refreshing sleep has an even more important function: it helps us stay spiritually balanced. The ancient *rishis* (seers) classified sleep as one of the four fountains, or primitive urges (along with food, sex, and self-preservation), that operate at an instinctual level to maintain our survival. When one of these fountains is out of balance, it can imbalance the others, creating obstacles to spiritual growth. For example, when we skimp on sleep, we tend to overeat and imbalance the “food” fountain. Scientific research confirms this: A recent Stanford University study found that the less sleep people got, the heavier they were. Shorter sleep duration boosts our level of ghrelin, a hormone that makes us feel hungry, and suppresses another hormone called leptin, which makes us feel full. And at Case Western Reserve University, researchers who conducted a long-term study with 68,000 women over 16 years found that women who got fewer than five hours of sleep each night were much more likely to gain

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33 pounds or more—despite the fact that they ate less than the seven-hour sleepers.

When we fail to get enough sleep, our anxiety level rises, too, disturbing the “self-preservation” fountain. Plus, it’s difficult to maintain a yoga practice when you’re overtired. Who wants to get up early to meditate after tossing and turning all night? Missing our practice can throw our whole day off balance and, worse, feed the cycle of insomnia.

The *Bhagavad Gita* (6:16-18) offers a message of moderation for practitioners:

Yoga is a harmony. Not for him who eats too much, or for him who eats too little; not for him who sleeps too little, or for him who sleeps too much.

A harmony in eating and resting, in sleeping and keeping awake: a perfection in whatever one does. This is the Yoga that gives peace from all pain.

When the mind of the Yogi is in harmony and finds rest in the Spirit within, all restless desires gone, then he is a Yukta, one in God.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is ancient, of course, and so doesn’t address our society’s skyrocketing use of sleeping pills, but it’s easy to guess what this sacred

text would say: When we depend on pills to put us to sleep, we’re only masking our problems. Yoga challenges us to become the master of our mind, not a slave to it. When our thoughts begin to keep us awake at night, our mental gymnastics need to be addressed, not suppressed.

But the media tempt us with quick-fix promises that can be hard to resist. One Lunesta commercial asks, “Are you at home, trying to sleep, but your mind is still at the office, reviewing tomorrow’s agenda, charting out the future? Maybe it’s time for you to be the boss. Ask your doctor about Lunesta.” The not-so-subliminal message? You don’t have to master your mind—you can gain control simply by taking a pill.

Unfortunately, this message has hit home with Americans. Last year, the pharmaceutical industry poured approximately \$300 million into advertising marketed directly to the sleepless consumer—over four times such ad spending for 2004. Sleeping pill sales have surged by 60 percent since 2000, with 42 million prescriptions filled last year alone. More than 26 million of these prescriptions were for Ambien, the 12th best-selling pill in the nation.

{ NESTLE IN FOR THE NIGHT }

Wind down with this 10- to 20-minute sequence designed and demonstrated by yoga teacher Lauren Toolin, director of The Metta Center for Yoga in Spencer, Massachusetts. Set an intention to do the poses gently and quietly, she says, and let your breath be complete, smooth, and even. End with the soothing pranayama practice of chandra bhedana, described on p. 64.

Prasarita padottanasana (wide-angle standing forward bend). Stand with your feet wide apart, toes facing front. Fold at the hips, placing the crown of the head on the floor or on a few pillows, with elbows bent and palms on the floor. Visualize all your burdens rolling off your shoulders. Hold for up to two minutes (about 15 relaxed breaths).



consciousness and loss of sensory acuity, even life and death, depend on the quality of sleep.

—*Charaka Sambhita*

But depending on pills is no honeymoon. Last summer, the *New York Times* reported on some of Ambien's eerie side effects: the woman in a body cast who miraculously arose every night to devour the contents of her fridge, then in the morning wondered who had stolen her food; the man who tore down the towel racks in his bathroom but had no memory of doing so the next day; people caught driving half-asleep who claimed to be under the influence of Ambien. Sleep experts warn that insomniacs should beware of becoming dependent on a pill and instead make lifestyle changes and rule out underlying conditions such as depression, which can be the culprit of their sleepless nights. Plus, sleep aids can be expensive. The new pill on the block, Lunesta, costs an average of \$3.70 per tablet.

Side effects and cost aside, if we need drugs to put us to sleep, we're in trouble. Ceding control to the pharmaceutical industry makes it impossible for us to explore, and eventually master, our own body and mind. There are better ways to get a good night's sleep. Through herbs, massage, and relaxing rituals, yoga and ayurveda can show you how.

THE THEORY BEHIND THE PRACTICE

Ayurveda says that all illnesses are caused by some form of indigestion. In the case of insomnia, Carrie Demers, MD, who uses ayurveda in her medical practice, explains: "At some level—whether it's physical, mental, or emotional—we haven't finished extracting what is helpful to us and eliminating what is indigestible. On the physical level, indigestion is caused by bad food or by weak digestion and leads to conditions like heartburn (a contributor to insomnia), flatulence, and diarrhea. Mental indigestion is the inability to let go of a certain incident or thought—usually an unpleasant experience. Emotional indigestion is the recurrence of a feeling, often sadness or anger, long after the precipitating event. The emotion has not been sufficiently digested and remains just under the surface, springing up for no apparent reason"—and keeping us awake at night.

Mental and emotional indigestion are the most common causes of insomnia, Demers says. People who grind their teeth in their sleep are attempting to chew and digest recurring thoughts and emotions. And dreams are another way the mind attempts to digest the day's experiences.

Vasant Lad, an ayurvedic physician and the director of the Ayurvedic Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, offers another perspective on insomnia: excess *vata* in the mind or nervous system. In the ayurvedic tradition, *vata* is one of the three *doshas*, or humors, governing the biological and psychological processes of our body, mind, and consciousness. Literally translated as "wind," *vata* is "dry, light, mobile, and cold," says Lad. "As the principle of mobility, it regulates all activity in the body and mind." When *vata* is in balance, it promotes creativity, flexibility, and lightheartedness. But when it's out of balance, it causes fear, anxiety, restlessness, and a number of sleep disorders.

Yoga and ayurveda offer a variety of methods that get to the root cause of insomnia, whether it's a *vata* imbalance or a form of indigestion. These methods work on a deeper, more subtle level than sleeping pills and have only positive side effects. Whichever method you choose, begin by following a few basic guidelines: limit your intake of caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol; avoid eating for two to three hours before bedtime; create a relaxing nighttime routine; and go to bed and wake up at the



Supta baddha konasana (reclining bound angle pose). Sitting on the floor, draw the soles of the feet together, knees apart. Place a rolled blanket across the feet and tuck the ends underneath the thighs to support the lift of the knees. Recline with a long spine over three or four pillows, allowing the shoulders and chest to broaden and release to gravity. Soften the belly. Release into the support of the pillows and floor for up to five minutes.

same time every day. But if you're doing all that and sleep still eludes you, try a few of these time-tested remedies.

6 BEDTIME RITUALS

Try nutmeg. According to *The Yoga of Herbs* by Vasant Lad and David Frawley, nutmeg is “one of the best medicines for calming the mind.” This common kitchen spice helps reduce high vata in the colon and nervous system and promotes sound sleep. Here are two treatments—one internal, and one external.

Warm, spiced milk. Add up to 1/8 teaspoon of nutmeg to a cup of warm milk (which contains a sleep-inducing amino acid called tryptophan).

Nutmeg facial mask. Mix equal parts of ghee (clarified butter) and nutmeg powder

into a paste and smear it around your eyes and across your forehead at bedtime.

Take a hot bath. It removes the day's residue, relaxes the muscles, soothes vata, and induces sleep.

Take an herbal sedative. Mix equal parts of powdered tagara, valerian, and chamomile. Put 1/4 teaspoon of the mixture into a little warm water and drink just before bed. Tagara (*valeriana wallichii*) and valerian (*valeriana officinalis*) are vata-pacifying sedatives, and chamomile balances the emotions.

Give yourself a 5-minute massage.

According to Lad, a scalp and foot massage is a shortcut to full-body relaxation.

Why? Because all meridians, or *nadis*, begin in the scalp and end in the soles of the feet. Plus, many neural endings, receptors, and *marmas* (pressure points) are clustered in the head and feet. By giving yourself the following mini-massage, Lad says, “You will get the benefits of an entire body massage.” Here's how:

- Sitting on a chair or bed, rub your hands with comfortably warm sesame, brahmi, or jatamansi oil. Alternately using the flat of your hand and your finger-

tips, make small, circular motions along the surface of your scalp for two minutes. Then switch to your feet.

- Put more oil on your hands and in small, circular motions, rub the top of your right foot from the ankle to the toes; from the ankle to the heel; and on the soles.

- Press your thumb on the top of the foot at the base of the shin. Gently and slowly drag your thumb toward the big toe.

- Return to the base of the shin and drag your thumb toward the second toe. Repeat this motion to the third, fourth, and fifth toes.

- Cross your right ankle over your left knee, place your right hand on the top of the right foot, lace your fingers between your toes, and push the foot inward, outward, and in a circular motion.

- Unlace your fingers and, using your right thumb, apply pressure along the inner border of the sole from the big toe to the heel.

- Drag your thumb along the outer border of the sole, from the root of the fifth toe to the heel.

- Make a fist and massage the sole of the foot in little circles. Slowly pull each toe away from the foot as though you are “popping” the joint.

- Repeat the entire process on your left foot.

When you've massaged both feet, soak them for five minutes in a bucket of

{ SNORING? NIGHTMARES? }

Try *nasya*, an ayurvedic oiling practice, up to twice daily on an empty stomach and at least an hour before or after showering. Lie on your back, face up, with a pillow under your shoulders and your head tilted back so your nostrils are parallel to the ceiling. Put three to five drops of medicated nasal oil or warm ghee in each nostril. Rest with your head in this position for one minute.

Did you know? Bats and opossums sleep for 18 to 20 hours a day, while elephants and giraffes sleep only



Adho mukha jathara parvritasana

(downward facing twist). Sit with your hips to the right of your feet and cradle your left ankle in the arch of the right foot. With a long spine and open ribs, turn the sternum and drape yourself over a stack of pillows. Place your right cheek on the top pillow, snuggling your belly into the support of the pillow pile. Repeat on the left side. Stay for one minute on each side.

warm saltwater to draw out the dislodged stress and toxins. Put on cotton socks, place a towel on your pillow, and settle into sleep. (In the morning, leave time for a longer shower; it will take a few shampoos to remove the oil from your hair.)

Make time for yoga. A regular, balanced hatha yoga practice circulates the lymph and blood, tones the channels of elimination, and balances both the endocrine and nervous systems, calming vata and helping the body and mind digest the events of the day. Whether you practice in the morning, afternoon, or at bedtime, yoga paves the way to a good night's sleep.

Do a relaxation practice. Yogic relaxation techniques train the body and mind to relax completely while remaining in a waking state. They also help you let go of sleep-disturbing stress and emotions. If you're new to relaxation practices, try this tension-relaxation exercise:

Lie in *shavasana* (corpse pose) with a cushion under your neck and your legs spread three feet apart. As you inhale, scrunch up the muscles in your face and pull them toward the nose. Hold for two seconds, then exhale and completely relax. Next, clench your right shoulder, arm, and hand on an inhale. Hold for two seconds, then exhale and let your muscles melt into the floor. Repeat on the left side.

{ HOMEOPATHY FOR INSOMNIACS }

If you look up "insomnia" in a homeopathic repertory such as Synthesis, you'll find over 400 remedies. It's a complicated subject, and a classical homeopath would prescribe one only after a thorough evaluation of all your symptoms. However, if you can't find a qualified homeopath right away and you're suffering from insomnia due to an overactive mind, try a low dose (30c) of one of the following remedies, if the description fits.

- If you're a fiery, type A personality who overeats, overworks, and even overplays, and your insomnia begins around 3 or 4 a.m., try *nux vomica*. This remedy is famous for insomnia due to indigestion.
- If your racing thoughts keep you awake at night, if you struggle with evening restlessness, or if you sleep lightly and wake at every sound, take *coffea cruda*.
- If your insomnia is infrequent and when it occurs you lose sleep due to an active mind until or even after 3 a.m., try *cal carb*.

These are generalizations about homeopathy; the more you individualize your diagnosis, the more successful you'll be.

Now tense your right leg from the buttock to the toes; hold briefly; exhale and release. Repeat on the left side.

Next, inhale and tense your entire body. Hold for two seconds, deepen the contraction, then exhale and surrender into the floor. Repeat this contraction two more times. Then surrender into *shavasana*. You can follow this practice with a systematic relaxation or simply lie resting, breathing as if the whole body breathes. As you exhale, let the breath release tension and wastes from the entire body. As you

inhale, let the breath nourish every cell and tissue. Continue for five to ten breaths.

As you become more advanced, there are a number of other systematic relaxation practices that train the mind to focus on and relax different parts of the physical body and, later, the more subtle energetic body. You can find some of these exercises outlined in yoga manuals. You can also try guided relaxation CDs such as *Relax into Greatness* by Rod Stryker or *Guided Yoga Relaxations* and *Advanced Yoga Relaxations*, both by Rolf Sovik.

three to four hours a day. In general, herbivores sleep less than omnivores, who sleep less than carnivores.



Salamba balasana (supported child's pose). Sit with a small rolled blanket between the heels and the sitting bones, knees apart. Tuck your stack of pillows between the thighs and fold forward. Turn your head to one side. Let the rib cage melt into the pillows and the arms drape to the floor. Relax for up to five minutes, turning the head to the other side halfway through.

Where to Find Ingredients

To purchase ingredients mentioned in this article, try the Ayurvedic Institute, ayurveda.com, 505-291-9698, or Banyan Botanicals, banyanbotanicals.com, 800-953-6424.

3 SLEEP TRICKS TO TRY IN BED

The following exercises will help you fall asleep—and stay asleep—by facilitating physical, mental, and emotional cleansing and activating the body’s relaxation response. Try them and see for yourself.

2:1 breathing. Have you ever noticed that when your nervous system is jacked up, your inhalations are longer than your exhalations? Short exhalations make us vulnerable to anxiety and depression, cause toxins to accumulate, and create an imbalance in the autonomic nervous system, all of which make sleeping difficult. The antidote? Make your exhalation twice as long as your inhalation.

To begin, lie in shavasana. Place one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest. Tune into your breath. (If your chest is moving, relax your rib cage and focus on breathing solely into your abdomen.) Let the inhalation and exhalation be approximately equal in length.

Gradually deepen the breath and slow it down: On your next exhalation, gently

engage your abdominal muscles and push a little extra air out of the lungs. Allow your abdomen to rise slightly higher as you inhale. Then begin to count your in- and out-breaths in even ratios—

starting, perhaps, with 3:3, then moving up to 6:6—whatever is within your comfortable capacity.

Let your breath flow quietly and smoothly through the nostrils, and when you are ready, let the next inhalation be a little shorter than the last. Gradually adjust your breathing to achieve a 2:1 ratio, exhaling for four counts and inhaling for two, for example. Focus on creating a smooth transition between your in- and out-breath, and back off a bit if you feel any urge to gasp for air.

If you sustain this breathing pattern for a few minutes, your heart rate slows, your blood pressure drops, and your muscles begin to relax. When practiced correctly, 2:1 breathing eliminates wastes from the lungs while calming and nurturing the nervous system. You can do this practice for as long as it is comfortable.

COUNTING BREATHS

If you’d like to take 2:1 breathing a step further, here is another practice you can use as a transition into sleep.

After establishing effortless 2:1 breathing, begin counting breaths. Take:

- 8 breaths lying on your back
- 16 breaths lying on your right side
- 32 breaths lying on your left side.

Very few people complete this exercise. Sweet dreams.

Resting at the heart. If 2:1 breathing sounds like too much work, try a yogic solution—use your mind to calm your mind. This exercise coaxes the mind out of the eyebrow center (*ajna* chakra), where it lodges in the waking state, and entices it into the heart center (*anabata* chakra)—its home in the sleeping state.

Lying on your back in bed, close your eyes, bring your attention to the heart, and think “one.” Bring your attention to your left shoulder and think “two”; left thigh, “three”; the navel center, “four”; the right thigh, “five”; the right shoulder, “six”; back to the heart, “one”; and so on, moving with relaxed attention at a comfortable pace. Let the mind busy itself moving in this pattern and it will tire and come to rest at the heart center, its sleeping abode. As you begin to drift off, break the counting pattern to avoid straining the mind. If you have a personal mantra, you can settle into mental repetitions, which will bring you to rest at the center of your being. Or you can also simply roll over and sink into sleep. +

Did you know? The average American spends nearly 20 years of his or her life sleeping.



Chandra bhedana. This pranayama activates the left nostril and the *ida nadi*, the lunar energy channel. Activating this pranic channel has a quieting effect on the brain and nervous system and helps facilitate sleep.

With your right hand, assume the *vishnu mudra* by curling your index and middle fingers into the pad of your thumb. Your thumb and your ring and pinkie fingers are extended. Sit tall and tuck your chin slightly. Bend the elbow and close off the right nostril with your thumb. Inhale through the left nostril to the count of five. Then close the left nostril with the ring and pinkie fingers, exhaling through the right nostril for five counts. Continue inhaling left, exhaling right for 15 breaths or more.