

Tips for circadian sleep health while working from home

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Sleep is more important now than ever

Getting enough sleep and maintaining a regular schedule for optimal circadian rhythm health is a challenge for most of us even in the best of times, but the schedule changes and added stress from the COVID-19 pandemic has likely impacted your sleep schedule over the past few weeks.

Sleep does more than just make us feel better the next day. It allows us to pay close attention, remember new information, and multi-task. Regularity of sleep and wake also maintains the health and optimal function of the circadian timing system (our internal biological clock). Insufficient sleep and irregular sleep-wake schedules can impair our health, weaken our immune system, increase inflammation, and even lead to increased vulnerability to viral illnesses. Given how important regular, sufficient, sleep is for our safety, health, and quality of life, the following tips may help to optimize circadian and sleep health in people now remaining at home.

Tips for optimal sleep and circadian rhythm health for those working from home

- The good news is that if you are working from home, you may now have extra time for sleep! Many of us usually sleep less than our optimal amount, resulting in a chronic sleep debt. Now that you don't have to commute, use that extra time for sleep to pay off your sleep debt.
- Many of us habitually cut our sleep short on weeknights and "sleep in" on weekends, which both creates a sleep debt and disrupts our internal biological clock. Working from home may allow you the time and flexibility to keep the same sleep schedule 7 days a week. If you are a night owl and can do your daytime work on your own schedule, embrace the flexibility to sleep at your (later) preferred times every night!
- Set your alarm for the same time each morning. A consistent wake time is key to maintaining a structured routine for the rest of your day, and keeping a regular/ schedule will help you sleep better at night.
- Get bright light exposure during the day, especially in first hour or two after waking. Our body clocks are set by morning bright light exposure, particularly when received around the same time every day. Additionally, bright light promotes alertness, which may be helpful if you find it difficult to get started in the morning. Try opening curtains to let in direct sunlight as soon as you wake up, taking a short walk outside before breakfast, or drinking your coffee on your balcony or in front of a window. When you are working, try to sit near a window where you can get as much sunlight exposure as possible.
- Try to follow a consistent schedule of social interaction and make your first social interaction of the day at the same time each morning. You may feel lonely following social distancing measures, especially if you live alone. Having a phone/video call with friends or family at about the same time each morning can be helpful, even if just a quick "hello" and check-in. The other person will probably appreciate the interaction too!
- Try to eat your meals at the same time each day, especially breakfast. Eating meals acts as a time cue and can also help keep your biological clock calibrated, which is important for sleep.
- Work out around the same time each day and avoid being sedentary for long stretches of time. If possible, exercise outdoors so you can get bright light exposure.
- Our body clock benefits from keeping day and night clearly separate. To do this, try keep your space well-lit during the day and do more active things such as working, doing household chores, or exercising. Dim the lights and switch to more sedentary activities in the evening, such as reading or watching TV. Keep a regular pre-bedtime routine to help you unwind and tell your body 'it's time to sleep'.
- Avoid using light-emitting electronic devices (like laptops, tablets, smart phones) for at least 1 hour before your set bedtime. Melatonin is suppressed by light exposure, so a dim evening environment is important in allowing your body to naturally produce melatonin and prepare for sleep.
- Make sure your sleep environment is dark and quiet. Use an eye mask or blackout shades, wear earplugs or try a white noise machine or app. If possible, leave your phone in a different room.

Additional information and help

- If you find yourself staying up later each night and sleeping later and later in the morning, you may be developing a circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorder. You may want to seek help from a sleep specialist if this causes your

problems with your work schedule or family. Call 617-983-7489 to make an appointment.

- To block blue light from your electronic devices, turn the brightness of the screen to the lowest setting, and turn on apps such as f.lux (multi-platform) or Night Shift on iOS and Macs.
- General information about circadian rhythm health can be found here: <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu>.

The authors are supported by NIH grants P01 AG09975 (RKY, KMZ, JFD), R01 AG044416 (JFD), T32 HL07901 (EP-D), F32 HL143893 (RKY), R01 AG054671 (EP-D), and the Milton Fund (KMZ).

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