

Natural sleep aids: Get to sleep fast without a prescription

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You toss, you turn, you can't fall asleep.

Certainly, there are sleep medications that can be prescribed by a doctor. And with some investment of time, [cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) for insomnia is considered to be an effective [option](#).

Yet, there are also a lot of healthy sleep habits and natural sleep aids that some experts believe can make a difference, too.

With more than 60 million Americans suffering from poor sleep quality, according to [Johns Hopkins Medicine](#), it seems like these easily accessible options could be worth a try when searching for the best natural sleep aid.

Practice good sleep hygiene

About 20% of Americans take sleep medication, according to recent research from the [U.S. National Center for Health Statistics](#). Those include a long list of drugs, such as Sonata, Lunesta and Ambien.

But [Dr. Sanjeev Kothare](#), a sleep expert and pediatric neurologist at Cohen Children's Medical Center in Queens, N.Y., suggests starting with some basics to make sleep a little easier.

"There are certain natural things that you can take and there are certain things that you can do," Kothare said.

Start with healthy sleep hours, Kothare recommends. For adults, that means going to bed at roughly 10 to 11 p.m. and waking up at 7 a.m., to get a good seven to eight hours of sleep. Teenagers need eight or nine hours a night.

Keep that schedule consistently on weekdays and weekends.

Don't take naps in the afternoon, Kothare said, because the pressure for

sleep builds the longer a person stays awake.

If you absolutely must nap, limit it to 20 minutes, Kothare added.

Cut off [bright light](#) sources in the late evening, so you don't suppress natural [melatonin](#), which the [U.S. National Institutes of Health](#) describes as a hormone that aids in sleep. Dim, [yellow light](#) in the late evening and bright light in the morning can help regulate melatonin production.

Some additional tips include keeping the bedroom dark and cool, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine. Thermostats are best set at 65 to 72 degrees at night.

Exercise regularly, Johns Hopkins Medicine suggests, but not within two hours of bedtime.

A warm shower at night can also help with relaxation, Kothare said.

Sips before sleep

Among natural sleep aids are some recommendations for beverages that range from quite common to a bit obscure.

Warm milk is one of possibilities, an age-old comforting suggestion. It contains tryptophan, Kothare said, and that helps with sleep.

More obscure is tart cherry juice, which might raise melatonin levels and increase the availability of tryptophan, according to the [Sleep Foundation](#).

The body uses tryptophan to help make melatonin and serotonin, the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#) says. Melatonin helps regulate the sleep-wake cycle, and serotonin is thought to help regulate appetite,

sleep, mood and pain.

German chamomile served as a tea may help with anxiety and sleep quality, but may not improve the experience for those with insomnia, according to the Sleep Foundation.

"Those are other natural agents, which you can try," Kothare said, "but it's not clear why those work."

Also on the list of potential remedies with unknown mechanisms are slipping some lavender into your bathwater or supplementing with a plant known as kava.

The latter may have an effect on anxiety, according to the [U.S. National Institute for Complementary and Integrative Health](#), but it has also been linked to liver injury.

Whatever you do, don't opt for alcohol or late-afternoon caffeine. It takes eight to 10 hours for caffeine to leave your body, Kothare said.

While alcohol may induce sleep, it will then wake you up in four hours after it leaves your system, he said.

Pop a supplement

Valerian and the mineral magnesium are two supplements mentioned as sleep aids, but research on them is mixed or minimal. Some think valerian works because of several compounds in it that work together, according to the [Sleep Foundation](#).

The option that is suggested most often is melatonin, a supplement similar to the natural hormone.

Melatonin is naturally released in the brain about four hours before someone feels sleepy, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine. It's set off by reduced light.

It helps control the [sleep-wake cycle](#), according to the [Mayo Clinic](#).

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) cautioned against considering melatonin supplements as a "one-size-fits-all" aid for all [sleep issues](#). It's not meant for insomnia.

A further complication is that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration doesn't regulate melatonin, which may affect individual supplements, according to AASM.

For that reason, Johns Hopkins Medicine recommends opting for the same brand and not purchasing melatonin online.

Kothare suggested melatonin supplements for occasional, but not regular, use. Take about 1 to 3 milligrams to induce sleep, he said. For example, you might take it if you think you may have trouble falling asleep before an expected stressful day.

More regular use is indicated for those who fly frequently, do shift work or have autism, he said.

"All others should be using it as and when required," Kothare said.

SOURCE: Sanjeev Kothare, MD, sleep expert and pediatric neurologist, Cohen Children's Medical Center, Queens, N.Y.

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