

Ayurvedic Tips for Sound Sleep

by Shannon Mooney

Sleep is a way to nourish our bodies, minds and spirits. It is an essential component of good health and peace of mind. This quiet state gives us a chance to renew, refresh and restore ourselves. Getting sound sleep each night imparts physical and mental balance to prepare for the next day. Ayurveda views restful sleep as important as diet and an essential pillar of good health.

Loss of sleep, or insomnia, is a widespread problem that interferes with our ability to work and think clearly. Our bodies can feel heavy, lethargic and sometimes achy after a couple of restless nights. The appetite is weakened and digestion is impaired. Ayurveda generally identifies insomnia as being caused by excess vata or excess pitta (or a combination of the two).

Vata's light and mobile qualities make it difficult for the mind to rest. Often a vata person will not be able to fall asleep because of the mind's tendency to replay thoughts and emotions from the day. When a vata individual does fall asleep, many times the sleep is light and restless, never quite reaching a deep sound sleep. There is a tendency to wake in the early morning hours, 2-4am, and be unable to get back to sleep.

Pitta individuals tend to lose sleep between 10pm-2am, the time of night ruled by pitta dosha. If pitta individuals can not fall asleep before 10pm, pitta's intense sharpness of intellect combined with the quality of light from pitta's fire make this a tempting time to "burn the midnight oil." They are also most prone to indulge in midnight snacks, which can further impair their quality of sleep and digestion. Pittas can also have a difficult time letting go of stress from the day and relaxing before bed.

Sleep disorders due to an imbalance in kapha dosha generally relate to excessive sleep and lethargy. Although the person may sleep long and deep, they do not wake up feeling well rested. Obesity and sluggishness can result.

Ayurveda's dietary and lifestyle guidelines, herbal remedies, yoga and meditation help to ensure a healing and restful night's sleep. Firstly, it is important to make sure that you are setting aside enough time for sleep. Some people do not need as much sleep as others, but generally six to seven hours of uninterrupted sleep is sufficient for most. People with a predominately vata constitution may benefit from more hours of sleep, while kaphas benefit from less. If you are not getting enough sleep, go to bed earlier. Early to bed, early to rise is a good recommendation for all doshas. Generally, it is not recommended to sleep during the day because this increases kapha.

Successful Ayurvedic healing always begins with removal of the cause. Though there are sometimes physiological and external factors that inhibit sound sleep, most causes of insomnia are psychological. Some common causes of insomnia are:

- anxiety stress
- fear & insecurity
- worry
- grief
- anger
- too much travel

It is also important to note that insomnia can occur as a secondary disorder or a symptom of other more serious disorders such as depression, acid reflux, or sleep apnea. In this case, the primary imbalance must be dealt with effectively.

Here are some general tips to create healthy sleep habits and promote sound sleep.

Diet

Vata individuals should eat warm and nourishing foods such as soups or other one-pot meals no less than three hours before bed. Generally a vata pacifying diet is recommended.

Pitta individuals can eat something more substantial, avoiding hot, spicy, and oily foods, to ensure that they don't get hungry in the night. Generally a pitta pacifying diet is recommended.

Other recommendations to promote sound sleep:

- Avoid stimulants such as caffeine which can disrupt natural sleep cycles.
- Try a cup of warm milk spiced with nutmeg or cardamom before bed.

Lifestyle

Many of us feel like we are on the go all day long. Every action of the body and mind uses energy. It is easy to see how a work environment creates stress, but what most people do not realize is that various forms of entertainment and even maintaining a social life can leave the body more tense than relaxed. One of the keys to relaxation is to reduce the number of stimuli to which we are subjected. Find some down time during each day to relax. Even just ten minutes a day can make the body and mind's transition to sleep easier when it's time for bed.

- Slow down and develop a regular daily routine.
- Take walks in nature or get some other moderate exercise each day.
- Make the bedroom a peaceful oasis for sleep and relaxation only. Keep computers, televisions, and other work related electronic devices in a different room.
- A warm bath or shower before bed can help to calm the nervous system and relax the body.
- Before bed, massage the scalp and soles of your feet with Brahmi Oil.
- Go to sleep before 10pm.

Herbs

- I Sleep Soundly contains the sleep promoting herbs chamomile, passionflower, and skullcap to help calm the mind, soothe nerves and support sound, restful sleep. Also found in this formula is ashwagandha which helps to rejuvenate the mind and body and manage stress while brahmi brings calm and clarity to the mind.
- Banyan's Tranquil Mind is formulated to soothe and calm the nerves without creating dullness or lethargy. This synergistic blend of herbs balances mental activity, releases excess vata and awakens a natural state of peace and well-being.
- Healthy Vata helps balance vata, remove excess vata, and support overall health.
- Brahmi Oil helps calm and clear the mind, enhancing peaceful sleep.

Meditation

Meditation is an effective way to reduce stress, dissolve anxieties and invite a sense of calm to your mind. This simple practice can help you to release tension and worries before they interfere with your sleep.

- Sit quietly, firmly rooted, focusing on the crown of your head and your breath.
- Bring your awareness to the natural rhythm of your breath.
- Notice the gentle inhalation, exhalation and the short pause of retention in between.
- If the mind begins to wander, invite it back to the breath.
- Allow thoughts to ebb and flow with the breath, staying perfectly present to each moment.
- Practice meditating 5-20 minutes every day, particularly before bed.

Yoga

Practicing yoga is very therapeutic for sleep. One of the most calming and soothing postures or asanas for the entire nervous system is Savasana or Corpse Pose. This pose gives total relaxation to the body reducing physical, mental and emotional stress and strain and fatigue of all kinds.

Follow these simple steps for Savasana and practice before bedtime:

- Lie on back, gently tucking chin and extending through the crown of the head.
- Allow arms to rest slightly away from the sides of the body, palms facing upwards.
- Relax the legs, allowing them to roll naturally open from the hip joint. Toes will be pointing away from each other.
- Draw an imaginary line down the center of the body, noticing the symmetry of shoulders and hips.
- Close the eyes and allow the eyeballs to sink back in their sockets.
- Breathe normally with full awareness. Make the breath soft and effortless.
- Allow the mind to descend toward the heart, passively watching each inhalation and exhalation.
- Remain in this pose for 5-30 minutes.
- Slowly and gently bring awareness back to all parts of the body.

Pranayama

Yogic breathing exercises or pranayama is an excellent way to revitalize prana within the body. Pranayama is a practice in controlling the breath. The breath is a bridge linking the body and mind. Pranayama cleanses and strengthens the physical body while calming and clearing the mind.

During deep abdominal breathing or full yogic breathing, inhalation happens in three stages. Firstly, the diaphragm moves downward into the abdomen, drawing air into the lowest part of the lungs. Then the intercostal muscles expand the rib cage moving air into the middle part of the lungs. Lastly, air comes into the upper part of the chest causing the clavicles to gently rise.

Try this practice before bed to promote relaxation:

- Sit in a comfortable cross-legged position or in a chair or lay on the floor.
- Keep the spine long and relaxed, with chin slightly tucked towards the chest.
- Place one hand on the abdomen and the other over the heart.
- Inhaling slowly, feel the belly expand first. Then, the rib cage expands. Finally, allow the breath to fill the upper chest, all the way up to the clavicles.
- Exhale slowly from the top down, gently pressing the naval towards the spine at the end of the exhalation to fully expel the breath from the lower lobes of the lungs.
- Continue steadily and rhythmically for 5 minutes.

Following the simple wisdom of Ayurveda, we can experience more relaxation in the body, helping us to ease into deep, restful sleep and wake with energy and vitality to meet the day.