



Postpartum Sleep Hygiene

Kelli Foulkrod, MS, LPA, RYT

Kelli@psychologycenterofaustin.com

According to Ayurveda, the sister science of yoga, insomnia is a type of mental and emotional indigestion. On some level, physical, mental, or emotional, we haven't taken what is helpful and eliminated what is indigestible and therefore an imbalance in the mind /body occurs. On the physical level, indigestion is caused by bad food or digestion, leading to pain like heartburn. Mental and emotional indigestion works the same way; it is the inability to let go of a certain thoughts caused by experiences such as old wounds, criticism, or problems we're trying to solve. The emotions have not been digested and remain churning under the surface of conscious awareness, springing up when the mind is quiet, such as trying to fall asleep. Wearing out the body, through physical exercise, in combination with relaxation, through meditation, the tension of stress no longer gets exacerbated by undigested mental chatter. When the muscles relax and the mind becomes still, restful sleep is a natural consequence.

Additionally, here are some practical tips to practice healthy sleep hygiene:

- Get daily physical exercise. It's recommended at least 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise; preferably earlier in the day, and NOT done within two hours before bedtime. While exercise can help to burn off excess energy, it can also be stimulating so your body needs time to relax after working.
- Honor your circadian rhythms, which are tied to the light of sun and moon. When the sun goes down, turn down overhead lights in the home. Move to mood lighting, candles, and nightlights, especially in the bathroom. This keeps the pineal gland producing melatonin, the sleep hormone, while bright light stops its production.
- Don't use computer, TV, or video games within one hour of your bedtime. Media (in addition to light from the screen) keeps your body aroused and can add to muscle tension. Additionally, don't use your bed for anything other than sleep and sex. Paying bills, answering emails, etc. should not be done in bed. Your bed should be a space for relaxation only.
- Move the clock away from your bed, so you cannot see it. Knowing how late it is only makes insomnia worse. It's easiest to fall asleep if your mind does not know what time it is.
- No alcohol or caffeine within 6 hours of bedtime. Although people think of alcohol as a sedative, it actually disrupts sleep, causing nighttime awakenings. Additionally, caffeine products, such as coffee, tea, colas and chocolate, remain in the body on average from 3 to 5 hours, but they can affect some people up to 12 hours later. Even if you do not think caffeine affects you, it may be disrupting and changing the quality of your sleep.
- Create a bedtime ritual. A relaxing, routine before bedtime helps separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress or anxiety which can make it more difficult to fall asleep, get sound and deep sleep or remain asleep. Some studies suggest that soaking in hot water, in a bath, before retiring can ease the transition into deeper sleep and help muscles to relax. Also, a cup of hot, decaffeinated tea works well.
- Go to bed **only** when sleepy. If not sleepy at bedtime, do something relaxing, such as yoga nidra or meditation, until you're drowsy. By lying in your bed tossing and turning, you are actually conditioning your bed to be a space for **not** sleeping. Your mind will begin to equate lying in bed with lying awake. If you wake up and can't fall back asleep within 20 minutes or so, **get out of bed**. Go to another room and practice a relaxation technique until you feel sleepy.
- Our sleep cycle is regulated by a circadian rhythm in our brain and the body's need to balance sleep and wake time. A regular waking time in the morning strengthens the circadian function and can help with sleep onset at night. That is also why it is important to keep a regular bedtime and wake time, even on the weekends when there is the temptation to sleep in. Also, avoid daytime napping, as it can throw off your sleep cycle.