

7 solutions to your sleep problems

Find out how you can remedy your sleeping troubles.

By Woodson Merrell



Light therapy

You can use artificial full-spectrum lights in the morning to help reset the body clock so you can get to sleep at a more appropriate time in the evening. In the past decade, pioneering research led by Columbia University investigator Michael Terman, Ph.D. established that the circadian rhythms that help set your sleep patterns are highly susceptible to changes in exposure to light rays — whether from the sun or from bulbs that mimic the full-spectrum of sunlight. By exposing the eyes to specially designed full-spectrum lights (10,000 lux fluorescent bulbs) for 30 minutes in the early morning, scientists have helped people get to sleep earlier and stay asleep longer. It is thought that regular exposure to such light in the morning triggers a more advantageous nighttime release of melatonin, the hormone that governs your body clock, but the mechanisms are not fully understood. You may be more familiar with light therapy for its use in treating seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression that shows up in winter months and stems from sunlight deprivation. Studies have shown that a course of light therapy treatments can have a dramatically positive effect on both sleep and symptoms of depression.

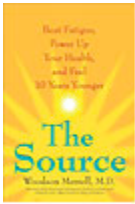
Light therapy can truly work wonders for people who find it difficult to fall asleep before midnight and are sluggish in the morning. Rapid improvement in falling asleep earlier is often experienced after just a few days of 30 minutes of exposure to a light therapy box upon awakening in the morning (see www.cet.org for more information on the boxes). For people (even teenagers) with more severe insomnia, who regularly stay awake until 1:00 a.m. or longer, shifting sleep patterns can involve sensitive timing. So while the procedure can be done at home, it is a better idea to work with a sleep specialist to devise the treatment program for serious insomnia. The treatment also usually requires waking up a little earlier each morning, which takes real commitment. But if you are miserable from insomnia, it's worth trying.

On the research forefront are special dawn-simulating sleep masks with embedded lights that turn on gradually four hours before the end of sleep. One might think leaving the shades open will do the same thing, but bare windows raise the possibility that your bedroom will be flooded with ambient nighttime light, which poses its own set of problems that are conveniently the subject of the next discussion, Dark Therapy.

Dark therapy

If exposing your eyes to light in the morning helps you fall asleep earlier and sleep longer, it should

come as no surprise that blocking exposure to light at night can positively influence sleep. Scientists digging further into the sunlight-melatonin connection have discovered that the blue spectrum of light has the greatest impact on melatonin and circadian rhythms. If you are exposed to blue light late at night – from a computer or television screen or a digital clock near your bed – it can wreak havoc with your body clock making it harder for you to get to sleep and to get up in the morning. Keep your room pitch dark at night, covering all digital clock or DVD player readouts. Interestingly, a 2008 study from the Corvallis Psychiatric Clinic in Oregon showed that using amber-tinted glasses blocked the excitatory blue spectrum of light commonly encountered during television and computer viewing. Using amber glasses during evening screen-watching time had a significant effect in inducing and promoting a good night's sleep.



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