



10 ways to get a really good sleep

The weekend looms, and that means a morning lie-in for many - though with the clocks going forward there'll be an hour's less shut-eye on Sunday morning. But, says Sean Coughlan, there's much more to getting a really good kip than just shutting your eyes.

Britons are the worst sleepers in Europe, claimed a survey last week, depicting a nation starved of sleep and facing a daily battle against red-eyed exhaustion.

One in five of the population sleeps for fewer than seven hours a night, according to research from the Future Foundation for the health campaign Sleep Well Live Well. Many of these tired souls reported feeling stressed and unhappy.

But how about looking at the question from another direction? If insufficient or disrupted sleep is bad for our health - then what would be the ingredients of a really good night's sleep? What makes a perfect sleep?

Dr Adrian Williams of the Sleep Disorders Centre at St Thomas's Hospital in London sets out a few ground rules.

Don't have any caffeine drinks after 2pm, exercise some time between 4pm and 7pm, have a milky drink and a bath before bedtime and try to exclude noise and light from the bedroom, recommends Dr Williams.

But sleep is a highly individual experience. Like our appetite for different types of food, we all have our own gourmet sleeps. Here are 10 to savour.

1. THE AFTERNOON NAP According to the wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the pearl of slumbers was the afternoon nap. "You must sleep some time between lunch and dinner, and no half measures. Take off your clothes and get into bed."

2. THE WEARY PARENT

For the sleep-starved parent, it can feel as though they've given birth to a temperamental air-raid siren. Their sleep fantasy is nothing more elaborate than a night alone and a long luxurious morning when they can wake up undisturbed. Maybe they could warm the room with a bonfire of all those smug-faced sleep training manuals.

3. HOTEL SCHADENFREUDE There are few more succulent slices of sleep than the first morning of a holiday. No alarm clock, no rushing for the train, no playing hunt the other sock, no making sandwiches for the kids. What makes it even sweeter is the thought of everyone else back at work toiling over a hot computer.

4. THE GREAT OUTDOORS Sleeping outside has a particular grass-scented pleasure, whether it's drowsing on a sunny afternoon in the back garden, on the beach or in the park. Looking up at the clouds creates that feeling of getting back to nature.

Fresh-air sleeping has a long tradition. Alice Ravenhill, an Edwardian authority on rearing children, ordered that bedroom windows should be always fully open, apart from in the severest cold spells. In summer, she recommended sleeping on the porch.

Modern hotels say they pitch their optimum room temperature for sleeping at 18 degrees. It must have been all the other ones I've stayed in that are hotter than the Gobi desert, with the windows bolted shut.

5. COMFY PILLOW Pillows now come with almost as much science as hair conditioner. And there are versions with in-built speakers to play sleep-inducing sounds such as a heart beat or soothing music.

This would not have impressed the Elizabethan writer, William Harrison, who attacked the young men of the 1580s for being so soft that they used pillows to help them sleep. In his day, real men slept on wooden logs or hairy sacks. Allergenic or non-allergenic sack, sir?

6. KEPT IN THE DARK For a city dweller, used to a constant fog of light, it can be a rare treat to sleep in undisturbed treacly darkness. It's becoming more and more difficult to find. There are light polluted skies outside - and the insides of homes are overflowing with light-emitting gadgets. Kielder in Northumberland is claimed as having the darkest skies left in England.

7. SNEAKY CINEMA SNORING

We've all been there. It's warm, it's dark, the mobile is switched off and you're watching a film or a play, and you feel an irresistible urge to close your eyes. It's been a long day and your body is crying out for a delicious moment of rest. The innovative Japanese have recognised a gap in the market and run "sleep concerts", in which rows and rows of exhausted salarymen cheerfully snore while the musicians play.

8. NIGHT MUSIC Who wouldn't enjoy being lulled to sleep by music? Or else the music is so dull that staying awake becomes impossible. Interpret this either way, but a study for the hotel chain Travelodge says that Coldplay and James Blunt are the most sleep-inducing musicians. Guests also like "unchallenging" reads, with the literary works of Jordan and David Beckham topping the sleep chart.

9. DREAMING OF FOOD The Christmas sleep, after a big dinner, is a classic of its kind. But different types of food have associations with inducing sleep. The NHS recommends eating bananas. Since the Romans, lettuce has been a persistent ingredient in sleep recipes. Less attractive is the use of dormouse fat, as used by the Elizabethans. The Victorians recommended top quality champagne as an insomnia cure. Even if you didn't get to sleep, it would still have been a good party.

10. WEEKEND LIE-IN Going home on Friday, the weekend stretches out alluringly. The first pleasure is the morning lie-in, that extra hour or so when everything seems possible. You lie there planning that great novel, dipping in and out of sleep. Nathaniel Hawthorne caught this perfectly: "You speculate on the luxury of wearing out a whole existence in bed, like an oyster in its shell, content with the sluggish ecstasy of inaction."

Maybe we're not bad at sleep, just out of practice.

BBC journalist Sean Coughlan has written a book on sleep and writes a blog on the subject (see link, right).

There's a lot of evidence coming out to show sleep disturbance is often the cause of illness rather than the side-effect of it. I see this almost every day as a health visitor/hypnotherapist. Learning meditation/relaxation/self-hypnosis is an extremely effective way of rebalancing the sleep pattern and enabling us to get through periods of sleep deprivation (eg new parenthood) without cracking up. **Sue Freeman**

My literary sleep contribution is Mrs. Galloway. Four pages in, and I am sleeping. I needed to read it for one of my courses in undergraduate studies, never managed it. These days, living in the core of the city, I sleep with black eye covers. Otherwise, the street lights, and store

lights blink or stay on until well past sunrise. Also, office lights in the towers around my apartment stay on all night. My final suggestion is a good long chat with a (group of) sympathetic listener(s). Often, ideas bounce around at night, waking the tired one; in turn this one blunders around, waking all others. So, talk out the ideas, bounce them around among people, and then, get some sleep. This may help the whole family. **Sonia, Toronto, Canada**

The best nap ever is in the back of an American Thomas-built School Bus. There is a heavily carpeted shelf over the rear engine the size of a comfortable bunk. A little warmth comes thru the carpet from the engine. For best results rise before six in the summer time, drive a route for a couple of hours and then pick up a load of kids for a field trip and drive for another hour. While waiting for the kids, use your jacket for a blanket and a left-on-the-bus jacket folded for a pillow, pull your cap down over your eyes and kip for an hour until it's time for lunch - and people wonder why I think driving a school bus is the best retirement job in the world. **Sandy Almond, Knoxville, Tennessee USA**

For the average worker to fit in the length of the working week and the hours every day spent commuting, and still manage to squeeze in time for family, household odds and ends, shopping for essentials and if lucky a few minutes during which the said harassed worker can do nothing but relax, it will be necessary to lengthen the day to 36 hours. A working committee is drafting the final version of the report, outlining the details of the scheme, and tenders have been invited for the manufacture of the new clocks and design of the new calendar. **John Lally, Reading**

We like the idea of falling asleep to music. We don't think James Blunt is suitable. We recommend jazz instead. **Miss Snow's Year 7 tutees, Letchworth**

I had the best nap ever while on call in Iraq. I had a stunningly vivid dream that I was napping in the armchair at home, just after Christmas dinner. I could even smell the turkey. Waking up to the truth was horrific, still stuck in a small stinking room with seven other blokes, still in my kit. **Richard, Kent**

I have always found church on Sunday mornings provokes the most pleasant slumbers one could hope for. Maybe it's the soporific tones of my particular vicar, who could make the sermon on the mount sound like an extract from the local telephone directory or it's the atmosphere of peace and tranquillity with angelic voices and a lovely big organ going on in the background - whatever it is, I just can't get enough of it **Enid Buttfield, Surrey**

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