

You're bone tired much of the day, so why do you find yourself awake late at night—even when your child is snoozing peacefully? We've got answers and practical solutions.

The Tired Moms' Guide to Better Sleep

By Sarah McCraw Crow

When my first child was a newborn, I couldn't wait for him to start sleeping through the night so I could too. I dreamed about a time when I would really sleep well. My kids aren't babies anymore—the youngest is a toddler—so that time should be now. But too often, I'm still tossing and turning at 2 A.M. and bleary-eyed the next day. My friends who are moms report similar experiences. It's a bit baffling: Sometimes our insomnia stems from a child's nightmare or illness, but just as often, there doesn't appear to be any cause at all. We all long for a good night's rest—so why aren't we getting it?

It turns out there are some surprising reasons why we're still awake—and most are easy to remedy. Here's how to have better nights and more energized days.

1 Bright lights at night

Few things are more inviting than a home that glows cheerfully on a dark night, but switching on high-wattage lights after sundown can make it harder for you to fall asleep. In fact, anything brighter than a 15-watt bulb may have an effect on your ability to rest, says Clete Kushida, M.D., Ph.D., director of Stanford University's sleep-research center. That's because, while darkness causes our brains to secrete melatonin—a hormone that makes us feel sleepy—light does just the opposite. It causes the brain to stop making melatonin, and that's the body's signal to wake up. To wind down faster, lower the light level an hour or two before bedtime. And if you need to get up in the middle of the night to check on your child or because you just can't sleep, use a dim night-light that you can turn on and off.

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2 Checking e-mail before bed

How could such quiet activity interfere with your sleep? "Using the computer or doing work is daytime activity," says Joyce Walsleben, Ph.D., director of the Sleep Disorders Center at New York University School of Medicine, in New York City. Getting immersed in such tasks right before bedtime will only rev you up, and your body can't instantly switch gears. If you have the space, keep the computer and home-office equipment out of the bedroom so you'll be less likely to associate your bedroom with work. And avoid other stimulating activity close to bedtime—such as watching disturbing TV news, reading a thriller, or discussing a big issue with your spouse. These can also lower your chances for a good night's sleep.

Alcohol breaks up your sleep, causes intense dreams, and may even make you snore.

3 Java in the afternoon

You already know not to drink a cup of coffee late at night, but caffeine consumed any time after midday can do a number on your body. And be aware that tea, carbonated sodas (not just colas—orange drinks and other sodas can be culprits too), coffee ice cream, and even decaf coffee may all contain enough of a jolt to keep you awake. Chocolate has only a small amount of caffeine but contains several other stimulants. You don't need to go completely

decaf—is there a mom out there who can do without her morning latte? But if you have trouble falling asleep sometimes, then keep caffeine to a minimum after noon.

4 Wine, beer, and other nightcaps

Yes, a glass of wine at the end of a hectic day will make you drowsy. Yet that's not the whole story. Drinking alcohol near bedtime may make you fall asleep faster, but chances are you'll wake up a couple of hours later. Why? Though alcohol is initially

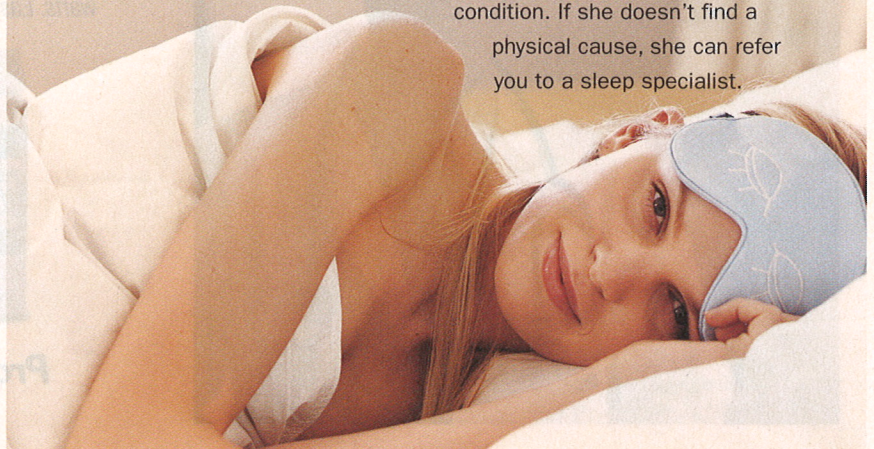
sleep-inducing, it also stimulates your nervous system. "Typically, alcohol fragments your sleep," Dr. Kushida says. "You may wake up from intense dreaming with sweating and a headache." You'll probably also need to make a midnight trip to the bathroom, because alcohol is a diuretic, and you may snore, because alcohol relaxes the muscles of the upper airway. To see how booze affects your nighttime rest, cut out wine and beer completely for a week. You should sleep more soundly.

5 Medications

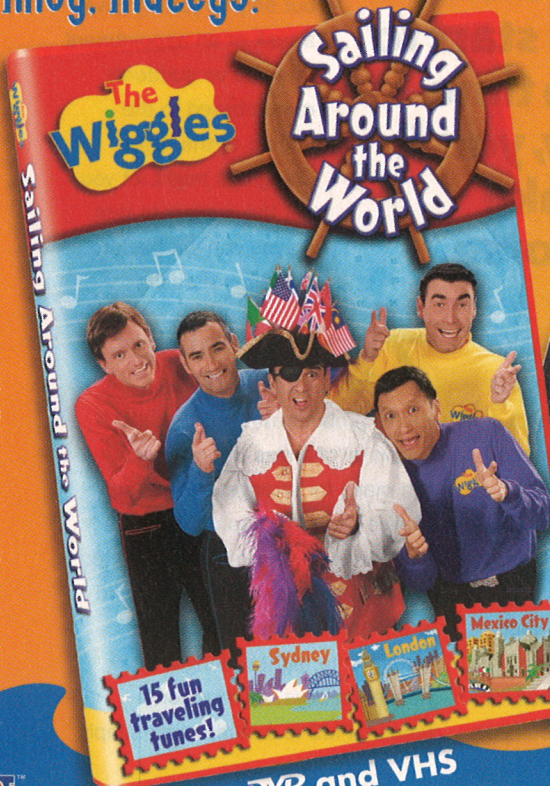
The list of medicines that interfere with sleep is long; some common culprits are asthma medications and decongestants. Surprisingly, even over-the-counter sleep medicines can disrupt

Got Major Insomnia?

Everyone has bad nights; that's part of life, especially for parents of young children. But what if your sleep troubles won't go away? First, try keeping a sleep log, suggests Dr. Joyce Walsleben. Write down what's going on during the day and which nights are worse than others. If you can't fall asleep (or can't stay asleep) more than three nights each week, make an appointment with your doctor. She can prescribe a short-acting prescription sleep aid, if needed. But more important, she can help determine the cause of your insomnia—such as depression, sleep apnea, an overactive thyroid gland, or another condition. If she doesn't find a physical cause, she can refer you to a sleep specialist.



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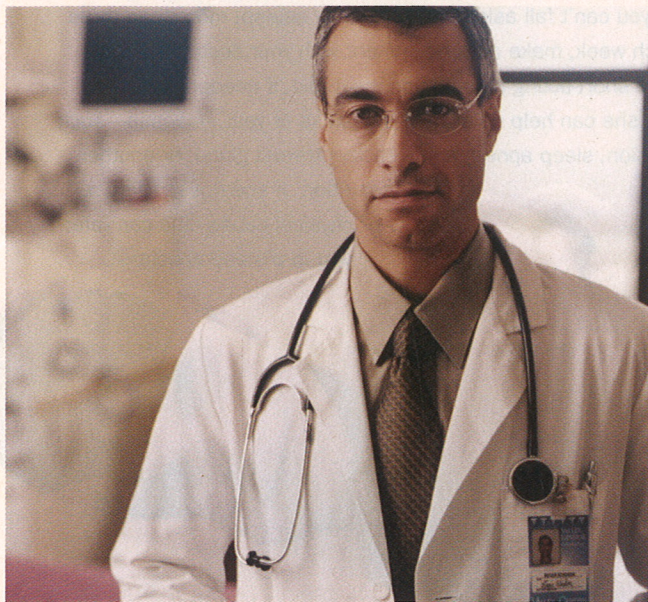
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nighttime rest. "An occasional over-the-counter sleep aid probably won't hurt," says Sonia Ancoli-Israel, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine. But if you use a sleep aid for more than a night or two, you can end up with "rebound insomnia" when you stop—insomnia that's as bad or worse than you experienced before taking the medication. And keep in mind that the active ingredient in those snooze remedies, the antihistamine diphenhydramine, may leave you feeling groggy the next day.

6 Working out worries

"Often the only quiet time a mom has is after her head hits the pillow," Dr. Kushida says. That can be a problem when something's on your mind

Hide your alarm clock. If you start to check the time repeatedly, you'll just make things worse.

(which, for most parents, is more often than not). Naturally, you'll mull over worrisome situations in bed, but this may put sleep out of reach. Try making a list of concerns—just don't do it late at night, Dr. Kushida suggests. Instead, schedule your "worry time" earlier in the evening. Then, closer to bedtime, quiet your mind and body by taking a warm bath, doing gentle yoga stretches, or meditating for a bit. If you must, keep

a notebook by the bed—but only for jotting down a task or an appointment that you've suddenly remembered in the middle of the night. Doing this might let you put the subject to rest so you can get back to sleep more easily.

7 Hormonal ups and downs

You've probably noticed that the hormonal changes of pregnancy can make for strange dreams and elusive sleep. But so can the ups and downs of your menstrual cycle: As progesterone wanes at the end of each cycle, you may be more sensitive to night wakings, Dr. Walsleben says. And for some women, PMS is a sleep killer simply

because it makes them feel irritable, bloated, or uncomfortable. If that sounds familiar, keep track of your cycle. "Sometimes just being aware each month that these symptoms are on the way may help, but you can also take better care of yourself at this time," Dr. Walsleben says. If you're really bothered by PMS, talk to your doctor about treating it.

8 Watching the clock

Surprisingly, the very act of checking the time can disturb your sleep. "It's one of the first things we all do when we wake up in the middle of the night," Dr. Ancoli-Israel says. "But clock-watching takes you from a sleepy, transitional state to a more awakened state." As you register the time and start to think about it, your

mind starts working when it should be resting. Once you start clock-watching repeatedly, you just prolong sleeplessness. So the next time you wake up in the middle of the night, try to keep your eyes closed (except, of course, if your child needs your attention). If you must get up, don't look at the clock. "Put your clock in a drawer or throw a towel over it," Dr. Ancoli-Israel says. "People who don't check the time fall asleep much faster than people who do."

9 Skipping exercise

For many moms, those daily workouts become just a memory as they try to fit in kids, work, and all their other obligations. But as Dr. Ancoli-Israel says, that's a mistake: "The more fit you are, the better you sleep.

Whatever you like to do for exercise, just do it—but not right before bed." Exercising in the evening will energize you and raise your body's core temperature, making it harder to fall asleep right away. On the other hand, getting exercise in the afternoon can improve sleep: Your body's temperature rises during your workout, then slowly drops for the rest of the day, leaving you drowsy and relaxed at bedtime. "But the real point," says Dr. Ancoli-Israel, "is to be active whenever possible." If you can fit in exercise, you'll sleep better and feel happier and healthier all day. □

* Ask an Expert

Get one-on-one advice from Jodi Mindell, Ph.D., author of *Sleeping Through the Night*, at parents.com/community.

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