

# Managing Sleep During COVID-19

## Tips for Veterans

VA



**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health Administration  
Office of Mental Health & Suicide Prevention

Insomnia can develop due to stress, and over time, sleep disruption can “take on a life of its own” even after the stressor has ended. Loss of sleep itself can become a new stressor, and this combination can maintain insomnia symptoms for long periods. Here are eight sleep strategies that can help keep sleep on track and prevent insomnia disorder!

### Tip 1

*Get the sleep your body needs, but don't spend too much time in bed.*

Go to bed when you are sleepy and get out of bed when you naturally wake up.

- A. If you are having trouble falling or staying asleep, or waking too early, set a regular morning get-up time and track sleep 1-2 weeks using a sleep diary (download the VA CBT-I coach app for a free, simple electronic diary).
- B. If you are still struggling, cut down your time in bed by 15 or 30 minutes. The goal is to cut out the time you spend *awake* in bed. Do this until your sleep improves.

### Tip 2

*Reserve your bed for sleep.*

Don't let work, worry, or other activities into your bed! Do not problem solve, watch TV, or use your smartphone in bed. Keep bedtime reading, if it helps you fall asleep, brief (10-15 minutes). If you are not falling asleep, get up for a while and do something relaxing. When sleepy, go back to bed.

### Tip 3

*Disconnect and wind down 30-60 minutes before bedtime.*

Prepare for sleep: get ready for tomorrow and set aside the news and social media. Meditate, pray, engage in mindfulness, read a book, listen to music, talk with your partner. Figure out what winds down *your* day. There are more ideas and exercises in the Tools section of the VA CBT-I coach app.

### Tip 4

*Reduce the impact of worry, anxiety, and stress on your ability to fall sleep.*

Worry and rumination are the enemy of sleep. Here are some helpful strategies:

- A. Mindfully accept challenges and know that you are not alone in your worries.
- B. Identify one step you can take today to feel less worried. Taking control and having a plan can reduce anxiety.
- C. Take a different viewpoint: If feeling anxious is getting in the way of sleep, develop thoughts that make you feel relaxed. Write them down and keep them handy. For example:  
*"I'm having a hard time sleeping because the situation is stressful but having good sleep habits and routines will help me get back on track quickly."*

*"It's normal for my brain to be a little more active these days and taking some time to relax at the end of the day will help me to sleep better."*

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**Tip 5***Be careful with the visual images you see before going to sleep.*

Images we see just before falling asleep are more likely to come out in our dreams or nightmares. Turn away from the news and look at calming images instead.

**Tip 6***Watch out for sleep thieves! Limit caffeine, alcohol, and electronics.*

- A. Your body needs time to fully process caffeine. Avoid caffeine within 10 hours of bedtime.
- B. Alcohol initially relaxes, but later it disrupts sleep quality. No more than 1 drink a day and avoid alcohol within 3 hours of bedtime.
- C. Electronic light exposure makes it hard to fall asleep. Cut out technology at least 30 minutes before bedtime.

**Tip 7***Get moving!*

Daytime activity creates good sleep. If you can safely go outdoors, combining activity with bright light helps set your 'sleep clock'. If indoors, open window coverings to let in light and schedule time for movement. Try an on-line exercise class or a phone workout with friends. Remember to follow the advice of your healthcare providers regarding exercise.

**Tip 8***Take action to make your sleeping space better.*

This might be as simple as organizing your nightstand or as involved as re-arranging your furniture. Making your bed and bedroom a relaxing and cozy space helps you feel sleepy and calm at bedtime.

Many people will find their sleep improves with the tips included in this handout. However, if your sleep does not improve, or it worsens, contact your VA provider for assistance. Your sleep difficulty might be Insomnia Disorder, which can be treated effectively with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I), the "gold standard" for insomnia care. CBT-I is a 5-6 session, medication-free treatment, which can be conducted in person, over the phone, or using video technology. Your VA provider can work with you to determine the best steps to address your sleep trouble.

**Additional Resources:**

- **CBT-I Coach** app (download on the Apple App Store or Google Play store)  
Access education and tools to improve sleep on your mobile device.
- **American Academy of Sleep Medicine's Sleep Education** page: <http://sleepeducation.org/>  
Information about sleep health and sleep disorders.

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