



# The Sleep Snatchers

Kick these shut-eye killers to the curb, and make your whole life better—overnight

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**F**EEL LIKE YOU NEED TO CATCH UP on some sleep? Better hurry: Men in a 2010 Penn State study who logged 6 hours a night or less were four times more likely to die of any cause than those who slept longer. "Lack of sleep can disrupt your immune system, metabolism, and cognitive function, and also increase your risk of hypertension, obesity, and diabetes," says study author Alexandros Vgontzas, M.D., Ph.D. Even if a shortage of shut-eye doesn't kill you, the outcome still ain't pretty: People who skimp on sleep appear sicker and less attractive, a new Swedish study reveals.

Your sleep thief may not be something as obvious as a noisy street or a bedside window. We've exposed six sneaky sleep saboteurs; read

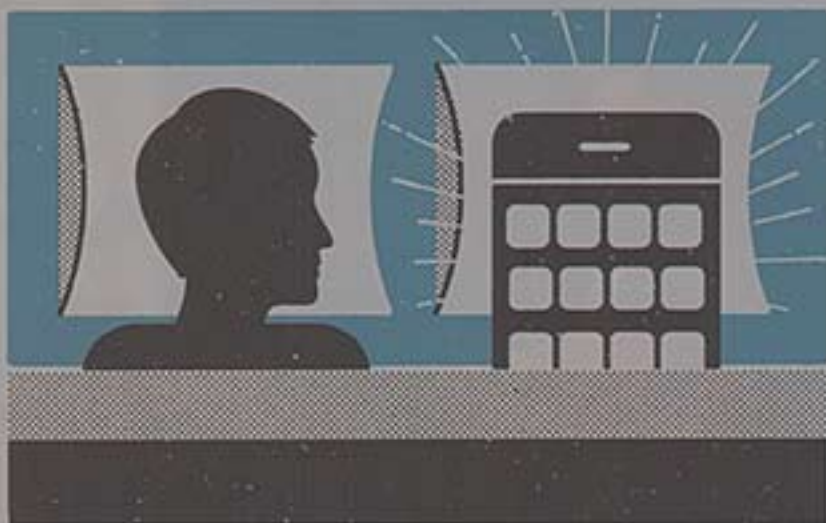
on to find out how to put 'em to bed. We're betting you'll notice a difference immediately: Getting a good night's sleep is the fastest way to improve your health, work performance, and even your sex life. Sweet dreams.

## Sleep saboteur #1 A hot bed

Sure, during sex you want things to heat up. The rest of the time, though, you should keep your cool. Keeping your thermostat between 68° and 74°F promotes solid slumber, says psychiatrist and sleep specialist Tracey Marks, M.D., the author of *Master Your Sleep*. Your body clock regulates your core temperature, and its fluctuations tell you when to sleep and when to wake up, she says. "You're coolest in the middle of the night, when sleep is deepest." If you're too

warm, your internal alarm assumes it's time to rise, and sleep becomes fitful.

**Rest easy** If the idea of cooling your entire house gives you nightmares, consider installing a "slave thermostat" to regulate only your bedroom temp. You can also tackle the problem lying down by using 400-thread-count cotton sheets—they're breathable but soft—and a gel mattress topper, such as the HiraKawa Gelmat (\$50 and up, [coolgelsolutions.com](http://coolgelsolutions.com)). "It's the opposite of memory foam, which retains your body heat," says W. Christopher Winter, M.D., medical director of the sleep medicine center at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville, Virginia. "The gel maintains a surface temperature that's lower than the mattress's, creating cooler contact points."



### Sleep saboteur #2 Money worries

A seemingly endless economic recession can swipe your sleep with the speed of a free-falling 401(k). "Decreased financial resources leads to worry over paying bills, and you may be required to work more," Dr. Marks says. "The physical and mental overload increases activity in your brain, causing you to 'think yourself awake.'" This is when frustrated insomniacs often resort to distraction tactics, such as television. But even though watching TV may calm your racing mind, the flickering light will interrupt secretion of the sleep hormone melatonin, causing a less-than-restful night.

**Rest easy** You'll need to wage chemical warfare. Stress triggers the release of the hormone cortisol, which has been linked to insomnia, says Dr. Marks. Endorphins, the brain's "happy chemicals," have a relaxing effect. Sex or masturbation causes a rush of endorphins, but there's an even quicker fix: humor. Try watching a funny 3-minute video on YouTube, Dr. Marks suggests. To avoid stimulation from the light of your screen, install Flux (stereopsis.com/flux), which dulls its glow to a warm hue at night. If you still wake up fretting in the night, try counting sheep. Seriously. Counting occupies space in your brain's "articulatory loop," the part that processes ongoing information, according to a 2010 study review in *Insomnia and Anxiety*. The loop's capacity is limited, so the fluffy guys crowd out unwanted thoughts.

### Sleep saboteur #3 Hellish heartburn

If daytime heartburn is a pain, a midnight attack is a nightmare. "It can stir you awake, often multiple times throughout the night," says William Orr, Ph.D., a clinical professor of medicine at the University of Oklahoma. Symptoms of gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD, occur when the valve between your stomach and esophagus malfunctions, allowing acid to seep past. Some patients wake up choking or coughing, while others don't consciously rouse but still feel drained in the morning. People with nighttime heartburn often wake up with a bitter taste in the mouth or a sore throat.

**Rest easy** Beyond avoiding oversized meals and spicy food before bed, try a sleeping wedge to elevate your head a few inches above the rest of your body. "It's a lot easier for acid to creep out of your stomach and into your esophagus if you're lying flat," Dr. Winter says. If you like to sleep on your side, curl up on your left side. On your right side, the sphincter between your stomach and esophagus may stay open longer, letting acid flow freely, a study review in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found.

### Sleep saboteur #4 A squirming bedmate

A limb-flinging, snoring, blanket-stealing partner will undeniably disrupt your sleep, but your bedmate may also be guilty of subtler offenses. Your partner's teeth grinding, frequent bathroom trips, or even body heat can also spoil your slumber, says Dr. Winter.

**Rest easy** If she tosses and turns, top your mattress with memory foam, which won't shift with her body. If that's too warm, choose a mattress with pocket coils; these aren't tied together, so movement won't create a chain reaction. If she's a kicker, ask her to sleep on her back or stomach. "On her back, it becomes more of a toe-tapping movement," says Dr. Winter. Or consider "sleep vacations"—sleeping apart a few nights a week. "You're ensured sound sleep, and there's no guilt, because these are set nights," Dr. Winter says.

### Sleep saboteur #5 Bad air

Love those pretty red sunsets in your town? Many times they're caused by air pollution, which may be seeping into your home and keeping you awake long after the sun dips below the horizon. According to a recent study from Harvard, poor air quality can increase your risk of disordered sleep breathing—repeated lapses in respiration during the night. "Air pollution increases inflammation. This may make your throat more likely to close and your oxygen levels to fall during sleep," says study author Susan Redline, M.D., M.P.H. The condition affects up to 17 percent of adults. (For more on the dangers of poor air quality, see this month's *Health Bulletin*.)

**Rest easy** HEPA filters can help, but only if you choose the right one. Standard HEPA filters offer a "minimum efficiency reporting value" (MERV) of 1 to 4. But you should upgrade to a higher-efficiency MERV 13 filter that also traps tinier particles (which can travel deeper into your lungs), says Bill Weinberg, president of AMHAC, a heating and air-conditioning company in Eastchester, New York. If you have allergies or asthma, consider a GAPA filter, a more powerful filter that uses electrostatic energy to attract fine particles, he says.

### Sleep saboteur #6 Smartphone addiction

E-mailing and checking sports scores are all stimulating activities that prevent you from winding down, Dr. Winter says. The worst part? The Pavlovian response to a "new message" sound. "If you hear the tone, it's irresistible," he says. Even a quick check wakes your brain and your body. "It's a light box that you're shining into your eyes at 11 p.m.," Dr. Winter says. "Your body is seeing a strong trigger that it's daytime."

**Rest easy** Break your addiction by using a passcode on your phone and changing it once a week, suggests William Pollack, Ph.D., an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard medical school. This forces you to pause before accessing the phone, breaking a behavior that's often on autopilot. You'll mentally register what you're doing, which helps control the habit. Check the phone once an hour or so before bed, and then cut yourself off, he says. ■

## There's a nap for that

A midday doze doesn't make you old. It makes you smart. A 2010 City University of New York study found that people who nap have sharper memories. But not just any nap will do: Use our guide to find your sweet spot. LACRA ROBERSON

### 10 minutes

A quick fix: napping for 10 minutes immediately wards off fatigue and boosts brainpower for at least 2½ hours, an Australian study found. A 5-minute nap? No help.

### 20

Delayed benefits: Doubling down will improve your reaction time and performance on alphanumeric tasks. But not right away—it takes at least 35 minutes to shake off the postnap mental fog from "taking 20."

### 30

A healthy boost: You'll feel drowsy for about 5 minutes afterward, but then more alert and mentally fit for 90 minutes. Still, a 10-minute nap is better; you avoid the hangover effect of a deeper sleep.

### 45

No help: During a 45- to 90-minute nap, you drift into deep sleep without completing a full sleep cycle. "You'll often feel worse after you wake up than before," says sleep expert W. Christopher Winter, M.D.

### 90

### 90

Signs of trouble: The average person's sleep cycle lasts 90 minutes, the ideal duration for a longer snooze. But habitual long napping may be a sign of a sleep disorder, Dr. Winter says.

### 110