

# Six sneaky SLEEP STEALERS

BY BARBARA BRODY

You eat right, exercise, and get regular checkups—but there's a good chance you're skimping on one crucial ingredient for your health: sleep.

“We live in a 24/7 world, and a hectic life often translates into less rest,” says Joseph Ojile, M.D., founder and chief executive officer of the Clayton Sleep Institute in St. Louis. But sleep isn't a luxury you can forgo, and not getting enough has been linked to just about every health condition, including diabetes, hypertension, and depression.

In fact, the ongoing National Health Interview Survey shows that getting less than six hours nightly is a risk factor for heart disease, and several

studies have tied lack of sleep to the obesity epidemic. “Sleep loss directly impacts your circadian rhythm and the production of hormones that help regulate your appetite and your body's storage of fat,” says Michael Breus, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and sleep specialist based in Scottsdale, Arizona.

The message is clear: Make sleep a priority. We've uncovered six unexpected culprits that might be keeping you up, so you can start getting more shut-eye—tonight.

## 1 **Not winding down before bed**

“Most people think they should conk out as soon as the lights go off,” Breus says. “But it's more like slowly pulling your foot off the gas and putting it on the brake.” In other words, you need time to decompress. His advice: Set an alarm to go off at least 30 minutes before your bedtime; that's your signal to dim the lights, put on your pj's, and do anything else that helps you unwind.



PHOTO: VEER

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**An in-your-face alarm clock** “The ideal alarm clock wouldn’t even have numbers on it; it would just go off when you need it to,” says Steven Feinsilver, M.D., director of the Center for Sleep Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. Many people wake up during the night, see what time it is, and start worrying about how long they have before they need to rise and shine—which only makes them even more anxious. If you’re prone to this habit, simply turn the clock around.

Also try to avoid using your smartphone as an alarm; the dings or lights of Twitter feeds and newsletters going out in the middle of the night can interrupt your sleep. Even if you turn the alerts off, having your phone right near you on the nightstand can create a sense of urgency and anxiety.

3

**A nightcap** Even just one drink right before bed can impact your sleep quality and snoring, because alcohol relaxes the muscles at the back of the throat, Feinsilver explains. And, while that drink might make you relaxed or drowsy at first, the effect wears off in about two hours. At that point, many people can have what’s called a rebound, and wake up tossing and turning.

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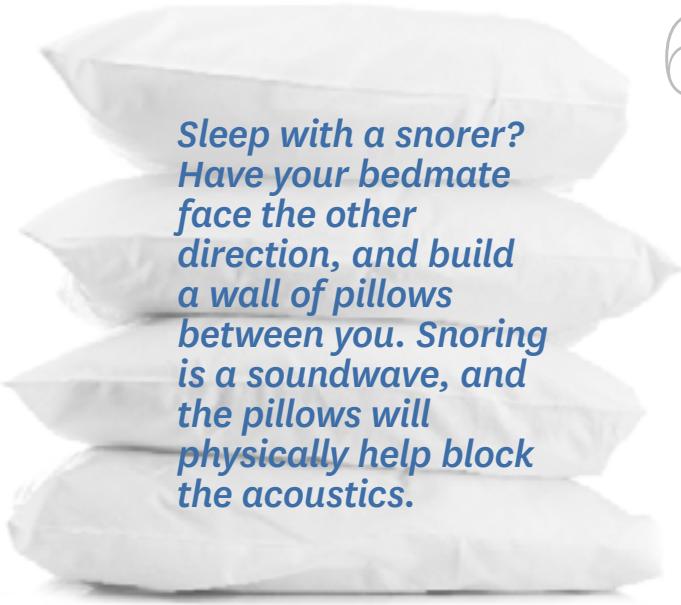
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**A cheesy dinner** Most nonprocessed cheeses—like cheddar, Swiss, and blue—contain tyramine, an amino acid that prompts your body to release a stimulating brain chemical called norepinephrine. “Norepinephrine constricts your blood vessels and can raise blood pressure, neither of which is conducive to sleep,” says Robert Rosenberg, D.O., medical director of the Sleep Disorders Center of Prescott Valley, Arizona, and author of *Sleep Soundly Every Night, Feel Fantastic Every Day*. Rosenberg also recommends avoiding spicy food in the evening (it can exacerbate acid reflux), as well as fatty fare like steak and French fries. “Your body has to spend more energy to digest these foods, and it’s difficult to wind down and sleep when your GI tract is working that hard,” he says.

5

**Getting ready for bed in bright light** “A bright overhead fixture gives off more than enough light to reduce the production of melatonin, the sleep-inducing hormone that your body produces to help you wind down,” Breus says. Take the bathroom lighting down a notch by installing a night-light or dimmer switch.

6



**Sleep with a snorer? Have your bedmate face the other direction, and build a wall of pillows between you. Snoring is a soundwave, and the pillows will physically help block the acoustics.**

**One last tweet** It’s tempting to connect with your virtual social circle whenever you have a free moment, but e-mailing, texting, tweeting, or posting photos is an inherently stimulating activity, which revs up your nervous system. “We need to quiet our brains before bed,” says Shelby Freedman Harris, Psy.D., director of the Behavioral Sleep Medicine Program at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City. Cozying up with your tablet or smartphone is also a problem because these devices emit blue light, which interferes with your body’s production of the sleep hormone melatonin.

## remedies for rest

What works, what doesn’t.

» **LAVENDER**

**yes** Don’t expect miracles, but a few studies have shown that inhaling this soothing scent seems to improve sleep. It might activate the brain’s limbic system, which plays a key role in regulating mood and emotion, Rosenberg says.

» **CHAMOMILE TEA**

**maybe** Many people swear by this herbal tea, and it won’t hurt you, Feinsilver says. But there’s not much scientific proof to back it up. If tea helps calm you, Ojile says that any decaf is fine.

» **VALERIAN**

**no** Study results are mixed, and the herb can interact with medications including antidepressants, pain relievers, and anti-seizure drugs. Too risky.

» **WARM MILK**

**yes** Milk contains tryptophan, an amino acid that your body converts to melatonin and the calming brain chemical serotonin. Many people also simply find it comforting, and anything relaxing is good for sleep. ■