

# Balancing Excess Sleep

The Ayurvedic Approach

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These days, so many people don't get enough sleep that it can be disorienting to imagine that it's actually possible to get too much of a good thing. The truth is that oversleeping can send our bodies into a tailspin in much the same way that sleep deprivation can. Excessive sleep can also be an indicator of a more serious health problem. So if you have not already, please consult with your primary healthcare provider about your sleep patterns. Whether your issue with oversleeping is occasional or chronic, this article will help to illuminate the Ayurvedic perspective on excessive sleep and will give you a number of practical tools for finding your way back to balance.

## How Much Is Too Much?

Our sleep needs change dramatically over the course of our lives. Just think for a moment about how much more an infant sleeps than an adult. Sleep requirements also vary a great deal from one individual to the next. Perhaps you've even noticed subtle changes in your own sleep patterns and needs over the course of your adult life. And regardless of our norms, we all tend to need more sleep when we are dealing with an illness or increased stress. All of that said, experts agree that adults generally require somewhere between seven and nine hours of sleep each night.<sup>1</sup>



Excessive sleep is a very real concern for many people, and overcoming the tendency can feel intimidating. Oversleeping can be brought on by a number of different factors, including medical conditions (such as sleep apnea or hypersomnia), alcohol, prescription medications, depression, other emotional disturbances, and a simple love of sleep.<sup>2</sup> But, oversleeping is hard on our bodies. There are actually serious health problems associated with excessive sleep, among them diabetes, obesity, headaches, back pain, depression, heart disease, and increased risk of death.<sup>3</sup>

But there is hope. Actually, supporting your body to return to a balanced sleep cycle might not be as difficult as you imagine it to be. And Ayurveda offers time-tested tools that truly support our bodies in reclaiming their natural rhythms. So, let's take a break from feeling daunted or hopeless, and focus instead on real and meaningful tools for balancing our sleep cycles.

## The Ayurvedic Perspective

We can intuitively understand that sleep requires a certain heaviness, stillness, and a distinctive quieting of the mind. These are the qualities that support our bodies in being able to surrender to sleep. When it comes to oversleeping, excess *kapha* is almost always involved in the imbalance. Among other things, *kapha* is heavy, slow, dull, stable, gross, and cloudy. In excess, these qualities can interfere with our ability to awaken or remain alert, and leave us feeling tired, unmotivated, lethargic, and foggy-headed—inviting excessive sleep.

Ayurveda teaches us that opposites balance, so emphasizing the light, sharp, mobile, subtle, and clear qualities helps to remedy increased levels of the afore mentioned sleep-inducing *kapha* qualities in the body. Interestingly, balanced *agni* (metabolic fire) embodies all of these supportive qualities and, in Ayurveda, is also considered one of the most essential requirements in achieving optimal health. Thus, tending to *agni* throughout the system is important, as is moving emotional stagnation that may be contributing to the pattern of excess sleep. Many of the strategies below naturally help to kindle *agni* and to clear stagnant energy—emotional and otherwise. Still, it can be beneficial to intentionally turn some focused attention toward these aspects of your life as you invite a return to balance. For more information on *agni* and how to care for it in your system, see our resource on [The Importance of Healthy Digestion](#).

## Supporting Quality Sleep

The Ayurvedic approach to balancing excess sleep is largely focused on countering any sleep-inducing influences with their opposites. But simultaneously, we must support the process by kindling *agni*, embracing a daily routine that awakens our natural biological rhythms, cleansing and invigorating the mind, and offering extra support to the emotional body. Ultimately, the goal is to foster sound sleep (for an appropriate length of time), ease in waking, and a healthy level of alertness throughout the day. If a medical condition is involved in your tendency to oversleep, please employ these strategies only with the approval of your doctor.



## Focus on Establishing a Kapha-Pacifying Daily Routine

Encouraging a sense of consistency in our daily routine is deeply reassuring to the emotional body and the nervous system. It also helps our bodies to form healthy habits and supportive rhythms from one day to the next. In fact, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of a daily routine for everyone, though its content may vary based on one's constitution, current state of health, age, and environment. For a deeper understanding of the importance of a daily routine, please explore our [Daily Routine Department](#) and emphasize a [Kapha-Pacifying Daily Routine](#). The recommendations here are focused on elements of a traditional Ayurvedic routine that are particularly kapha-pacifying and that will generally help to balance oversleeping tendencies.

### **Get up at the same time every day, preferably before 6 a.m.**

When it comes to the habit of oversleeping, the most important element of a daily routine is a consistent wake time (even on the weekends), because it helps to reset the body's biological rhythms. Kapha is elevated in the atmosphere from about 6–10 a.m., which can increase the sense of heaviness and make it harder to awaken. Particularly if you struggle getting up in the morning, try committing to waking up by or before 6 a.m.

### **Adjust your bedtime to support waking at a consistent time.**

Your body will still need adequate sleep, so if you are in the habit of going to bed very late, achieving a consistent (and earlier) wake time may require an adjustment to your bedtime. If the quality of your sleep is not disturbed, you can simply calculate an appropriate bedtime based on when you would like to wake up. Seven to nine hours per night should be sufficient, but for most struggling with oversleep, it is best to aim for no more than eight hours at first. You know your body's optimal amount of sleep best, but in the beginning, err on the side of less sleep rather than more. Oversleeping increases kapha in the body, so it can take a period of intentionally sleeping less in order to fully embody the natural lightness that will help you maintain a more balanced sleep cycle into the future.

Of course, certain times of day have a more direct impact on our sleep cycle, namely those periods on either side of sleep—just prior to bed and immediately after waking. Observing specific practices at these times of day can be a profound catalyst for positive change.

## In the Evening:

### **Exercise between 6–10 p.m.**

Exercising in the hours before bed can help to carry a bit of extra lightness into your sleep cycle. Exercise is inherently lightening, and since kapha is elevated in the atmosphere from about 6–10 p.m., exercising during this time helps to balance excess kapha before bed, reducing its influence on your sleep cycle.

### **Eat a very light dinner early in the evening.**

Eating a heavy meal before going to bed reinforces the heavy, stabilizing qualities that are at the root of excessive sleep. Like exercise, eating a light dinner such as a bowl of soup, a salad, or even just a little fruit will encourage more lightness throughout the sleep cycle and will generally improve the quality of sleep as well. It is best to finish dinner at least three hours prior to bedtime.



### **Go to bed after 10 p.m.**

Because kapha is elevated from about 6–10 p.m., retiring to bed during this window of time can result in increased heaviness and sluggishness in the body. Until the struggle with oversleep is resolved, going to bed slightly after 10 p.m. can bolster lightness in the system and make it easier to awaken in the morning.

### Upon Waking, Consider:

#### **Massaging the body with dry powder.**

*Udvaartana* is an invigorating practice of massaging the body with soft powders (like chickpea or rice flours). It increases circulation, stimulates movement of the lymph, liquefies fat, tones and strengthens the tissues, clears toxins, bolsters skin health, and reduces kapha.<sup>4</sup> This practice also helps to awaken the mind and the physiology—clearing any lingering sluggishness from the system. If working with powders does not appeal to you, an invigorating massage with a loofa or exfoliating gloves before or during a shower can offer a similar effect.

#### **Practicing a few minutes of energizing yoga or pranayama.**

Kapha-pacifying *pranayamas* (yogic breathing exercises) and yoga *asanas* (postures) are an effective way to shake off any heaviness or lethargy that might normally cloud the start of your day. More specific recommendations follow, [below](#).

#### **The addition of other invigorating practices.**

A morning routine that sets a clarifying tone for the new day can be immensely supportive. You might include scraping your tongue, splashing your face and eyes with cold water, a morning shower, or an invigorating morning walk.

## Practice Good Sleep Hygiene

These practices further support healthy circadian rhythms and quality sleep. Many of them are time-tested Ayurvedic strategies that are now being embraced by modern medicine in the treatment of sleep disorders. When we are sleeping excessively, we want to reduce the quantity of sleep, not its quality. These helpful habits should help to ensure that your body continues to get the rest that it requires.

To start with, make the bedroom—and specifically the bed—a sacred place for sleep and sex only. This is not the place to study, read, watch TV, surf the internet, or pay bills. The bedroom should be conducive to sleep in every way possible. The temperature, lighting (or level of darkness), noise level, and humidity are all potentially supportive or disruptive to sleep. It is important to honor whatever works best for you. Ultimately, you need to feel comfortable in the sleep environment you create for yourself. However, when kapha is high, the bed should not be overly luxurious. A bed that is too fluffy, too soft, or too cozy can further aggravate kapha and will make getting out of bed that much more difficult. In general, the most supportive choice in cases of excess sleep will be a firmer, more minimalistic bed. In addition, consider adopting as many of these supportive habits as possible:



### **Eliminate screen time in the evening.**

Screen time of any kind is incredibly disruptive to the biological rhythms that support sleep. If you are serious about balancing your sleep cycle, it is best to limit or eliminate screen time from the hours immediately before you sleep—ideally from dinner onward.

### **Eliminate stimulants.**

In much the same way, stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol tend to disrupt physiological cycles essential to sound sleep.<sup>5</sup> It is best to eliminate them entirely (or as much as possible) from your lifestyle.

### **Eliminate bedtime reading.**

Reading before bed is very stimulating and can prevent sound sleep. It is best to avoid reading in bed, and you might consider eliminating reading from your evening routine altogether.

## Prioritize Proper Exercise

Exercise serves the body in many different ways, provided it is done at an appropriate intensity for your constitution and current state of balance. Exercise kindles agni, improves digestion, promotes proper circulation, bolsters the body's detoxification mechanisms, encourages proper elimination, and fosters sound sleep—all while balancing kapha, clearing stagnation, and increasing lightness in the body.<sup>6</sup> Making time to move our bodies regularly is both energizing and motivating. In fact, when it comes to excess sleep, regular exercise is one of the most powerful antidotes that exists. But your workouts need to be fun and invigorating for you—and they have to be doable. The great news is that just fifteen to twenty minutes of exercise can be tremendously beneficial. Of course, if your preferred regimen is longer, that's fine too.



To balance kapha, get plenty of kapha-pacifying exercise:

- Exercise a minimum of three to five times per week.
- Make sure that your exercise routine is vigorous, challenging, and fun.
- Favor activities like brisk walking, jogging, biking, hiking, martial arts, and other forms of strength-building, aerobic exercise.
- If you practice yoga, practice [kapha-pacifying yoga](#) or a handful of continuous and flowing [Sun Salutations](#) each morning.



Ayurveda also recommends that we exercise only at fifty percent of our capacity—until we break a mild sweat on the forehead, under the arms, and along the spine.<sup>7</sup> This approach prevents physiological stress and allows the body to benefit more deeply from our efforts. In recent years, we've seen the emergence of a method of exercise called High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT)—which alternates between short, intense bursts of physical activity and carefully interspersed recovery periods. Workouts range from eight to thirty minutes, and usually involve a short warm-up period, three to ten short sprints (twenty to sixty seconds each), short recovery periods (of ten to sixty seconds) in between, and a brief cool down period.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that HIIT may actually be more efficient and more effective at boosting metabolic function than other forms of exercise<sup>9</sup>—which is incredibly good news for busy schedules and disturbed sleep cycles.

Regardless of your preferred activity, the most important thing is to make your exercise regimen an inspiring and energizing part of your week so that you are motivated to keep at it. Please check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

## Manage Stress and Emotional Disturbances

Because stress and emotional disturbances are so often a factor in excess sleep, it is imperative that we also support the nervous system and emotional body wherever possible. Ayurveda recommends a number of subtle therapies like meditation, pranayama, and yoga as an effective means of clearing the mind, balancing emotions, and mitigating stress.

### Meditation

If you do not have a meditation practice, something simple like [So Hum Meditation](#) is a great place to start. Even five to ten minutes can be transformative.

### Pranayama

[Full Yogic Breath](#), [Nadi Shodhana](#), [Bhastrika](#), and [Kapalabhati](#) are especially invigorating, clarifying and kapha-pacifying pranayamas. Most of them should be practiced on an empty stomach. The early morning is often an ideal time. Even five to fifteen minutes of pranayama daily can have a profound effect on our overall state of mind. Similarly, a few minutes of pranayama in the evening before bed can clear the mind while preventing excessively heavy sleep.

### Yoga

A challenging and invigorating [kapha-pacifying yoga](#) practice will typically be best for countering excess sleep. Morning yoga will help awaken the tissues and the mind, shake off sluggishness, effectively kindle agni, and set the tone for a balanced day. Evening yoga can help to clear the mind, increase lightness in the body, and stimulate the metabolic fire overnight. Either way, yoga elicits improved balance in the mind and body.



## Consider the Addition of Supportive Herbs

There are also a number of Ayurvedic herbs that can help to balance excess kapha in support of a more balanced sleep cycle. These herbs work by kindling agni, clearing stagnation, burning *ama* (toxins), reducing excess kapha throughout the system, and promoting lightness and clarity in the mind and body.

**Brahmi/Gotu Kola** is incredibly *sattvic* in nature and is renowned for its ability to support the nervous system and the mind. It is a cooling, relaxing tonic for the mind and can help soothe the mental and emotional body in order to support healthy amounts of sleep. **Brahmi/Gotu Kola liquid extract** is also available.

**Mental Clarity tablets** combine Brahmi with a number of other supportive herbs to foster mental alertness, clarity, concentration, and general health throughout the nervous system. This formula can help to lift the mental fog and encourage more balanced sleep cycles.

**Ashwagandha** has long been revered for its ability to support the body in resisting stress while calming the mind and balancing kapha. As a highly regarded adaptogen, Ashwagandha supports quality energy throughout the day and sound sleep at night. If stress and mental angst are contributing factors for you, this herb might be a wonderful choice, as it balances and tones the nervous system. **Ashwagandha tablets** and **liquid extract** are also available.

**Triphala** is a traditional Ayurvedic formula comprised of three fruits. Balancing for *vata*, *pitta*, and kapha, it offers more specific support for digestion and elimination. It is revered for its unique ability to gently cleanse and detoxify the digestive tract while replenishing, nourishing, and rejuvenating the tissues. About half an hour before bed, take two **Triphala tablets** with a glass of warm water. Or, if you prefer a powder, steep ½ teaspoon **Triphala powder** in a cup of freshly boiled water for ten minutes. Cool and drink. **Triphala liquid extract** is also available.

If kapha is truly your primary imbalance, consider taking Bibhitaki instead of Triphala. Simply steep ½ teaspoon **Bibhitaki powder** in a cup of freshly boiled water for ten minutes. Cool and drink.

**Healthy Kapha tablets** help to balance kapha throughout the system in support of overall health and well-being.

**Kapha Digest tablets** help to eliminate excess kapha from the digestive tract and can be very supportive in balancing agni. This formula is also available in powdered form as **Trikatu**, which can be taken alone or sprinkled on your food, like pepper.

## Finding Your Unique Path Toward Balance

While Ayurveda offers a number of effective tools for balancing excess sleep, working with an Ayurvedic practitioner can be incredibly clarifying and can help to focus therapeutic efforts where they will deliver the best results for your particular situation. That said, the above remedies provide a solid foundation for anyone struggling with excessive sleep.



While oversleeping can certainly be frustrating and debilitating, the Ayurvedic tradition offers a very holistic approach to finding balance. As with most ailments, when we address the deeper context of our lives and begin to correct the root cause of our imbalances, we are inevitably taking profound steps toward improved overall health and wellness. We sincerely hope that we can continue to support you as you seek to achieve a more balanced sleep cycle and vibrant health.



## References

<sup>1</sup> "Physical Side Effects of Oversleeping," Web MD, last modified 27 Aug 2012, <http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/physical-side-effects-oversleeping>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Welch, *Dinacharya: Changing Lives Through Daily Living* (Self-published, 2007), PDF e-book, *Dinacharya: A Daily Routine/Udvaartana*, <http://drclaudiawelch.com/resources/articles/dinacharya-changing-lives-through-daily-living/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Slideshow: Insomnia Myths and Facts." Web MD, last modified 8 May, 2014, <http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/living-with-insomnia-11/slideshow-insomnia>.

<sup>6</sup> Vasant Lad, *Textbook of Ayurveda Volume 1: Fundamental Principles of Ayurveda* (Albuquerque: The Ayurvedic Press, 2002), 283.

<sup>7</sup> Vasant Lad, *The Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 60-1; Welch, *Dinacharya, Dinacharya: A Daily Routine/Exercise*.

<sup>8</sup> "High Intensity Interval Training," Wikipedia, retrieved 7 Dec, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-intensity\\_interval\\_training](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-intensity_interval_training).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen H. Boutcher, "High-Intensity Intermittent Exercise and Fat Loss," *Journal of Obesity*, 868305 (2011), NCBI, published online 24 Nov, 2010, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2991639/?report=classic>.

