

An Ayurvedic Guide to Balanced Sleep



Do you suffer from irregular sleep? Perhaps it's falling asleep that troubles you. Maybe you wake up in the middle of the night, wanting desperately to keep sleeping, but are unable to. Or is your tendency to spend more time sleeping than is physiologically necessary, so that you actually get *too much* sleep (which can be equally problematic)? The truth is that imbalances in our sleep patterns can be very discouraging—even debilitating—and the task of getting back on track can feel incredibly daunting. But with the right set of tools, it is possible to find and return to balance. Being the timeless art of living that it is, Ayurveda offers a refreshingly simple and practical approach to balancing sleep cycles.

We spend roughly a third of our lives asleep, and while scientists have been studying the functions of sleep extensively for years, some of our most basic questions about why we sleep have been difficult to answer.¹ What is clear is that balanced sleep is a staple of optimal health.² Sleep is a natural time for the body and mind to rest, reset, detoxify, and rejuvenate—and sleep is carefully regulated by our bodies. In terms of our overall health, sleep is actually on par with eating; it is essential to both physiological and cognitive functioning.³ And in much the same way that hunger serves as a safeguard against undernourishment, sleepiness acts as a protective mechanism against inadequate rest.⁴



But sometimes life interferes with our internal biological rhythms and they become slightly out of whack, which can result in either too much sleep or too little. This article will help to point you in the direction of a number of useful Ayurvedic tools for returning to balance.

The Functions of Sleep

Farmers everywhere know that a field is far more productive when it is allowed to periodically lie fallow to regenerate the fertility of the soil. Sleep provides a similar period of rest for the body and mind—but we don't fully understand it. One of the most confounding aspects of sleep for scientists has been the fact that, in nature, sleep is a risky business, with a very real potential to leave animals vulnerable to injury, predation, and death.⁵ So why do most animals (humans included) need to sleep in order to survive? Sleep itself must offer something that cannot be obtained thru conscious or semi-conscious *rest*.

Actually, we do know that a balanced sleep cycle plays a very important role in our health and well-being on a number of levels. Some of the benefits of sleep may be fairly ethereal in nature, and therefore difficult to assess. But it is noteworthy that indigenous cultures around the world have long valued the altered states of consciousness that occur during sleep as an important means of receiving information, healing, and guidance from the unseen world. In fact, many traditions view dreams as the language of the soul. Even Western science has affirmed our capacity to release both stress and anxiety, and to process unresolved emotions through our dreams.⁶ There is also increasing evidence in the field of psychology that sleep plays a critical role in supporting the emotional centers of the brain—as well as overall emotional and behavioral health.⁷ In the yogic tradition, sleep shares many similarities with *Samadhi*—a highly revered meditative state beyond the reach of the rational mind.⁸ Though in sleep, we are generally in the realm of the unconscious mind, whereas *Samadhi* is achieved through conscious awareness.⁹

Other functions of sleep are more concrete and can be easily measured by modern science. As we have all experienced, sleep helps to restore our level of alertness. During wakeful periods, the neuromodulator adenosine slowly accumulates in the brain, causing us to feel more and more tired the longer we are awake. During sleep, adenosine is actively cleared from the brain, which is why we feel more refreshed and alert after a good night's sleep.¹⁰ Interestingly, caffeine blocks the effects of adenosine on the brain so that we remain alert when we might normally feel tired or sleepy.¹¹

Additionally, sleep has important restorative functions and plays a critical role in the repair and rejuvenation of tissues—both in the brain and elsewhere in the body. Activities like muscle growth, tissue repair, wound healing, protein synthesis, and the release of growth hormone occur mostly, if not entirely, during sleep.¹² Sleep also promotes the more efficient removal of metabolic wastes, and very directly supports the immune system.¹³ Remarkably, studies have shown a total loss of immune function—followed by death—among animals that are completely deprived of sleep.¹⁴ Studies have also linked sleep deprivation with increased cancer growth and a decrease in the immune system's ability to control the growth of cancer cells.¹⁵



Further, sleep has been linked to important changes in the structure and function of the brain.¹⁶ When it comes to infants and young children, sleep (and a lot of it) is absolutely critical to proper brain development.¹⁷ In adults, similar correlations have been drawn between sleep and the brain's ability to reorganize itself and form new neural pathways.¹⁸ Sleep also helps to restore the signal strength of important brain synapses, facilitating learning and memory.¹⁹ In other words, our sleep very directly affects our ability to learn, retain information, perform tasks, develop new perspectives, and re-pattern neurological pathways. For all of these reasons and more, it is actually quite important that we get an appropriate amount of sleep.

Ayurveda's Perspective on Sleep Disorders

In Ayurveda, sleep disorders are classified according to *dosha*. There are *vata*-, *pitta*-, and *kapha*-type sleep disturbances—each with a distinct character, and a corresponding line of treatment. But the doshas can also have a distinctive influence on our sleep preferences and habits. As with many things in Ayurveda, one's constitution and current state of balance will influence the types of sleep imbalances that are most likely to crop up. A *vata*-predominant individual is more likely to experience *vata*-type sleep disorders; *pitta*-types will tend toward *pitta* sleep complaints, and *kapha*-types toward *kapha* sleep issues. But any imbalances overlaying the constitution will also influence the situation. If you do not know [your constitution](#) or [your current state of balance](#), please consider taking our simple quizzes by clicking on the above links.

The following sections are meant to help you understand how each of the three doshas informs your experience of sleep. Look for what you identify with—both in terms of your sleep habits and preferences, as well as the types of imbalances that tend to influence your sleep patterns.

Vata-Type Sleep and Sleep Imbalances

Vata-type sleep tends to be irregular and light, but can be profoundly deep when one is exhausted. *Vata*-types typically crave a soft bed to cushion their protruding bones, and tend to sleep fewer hours than other types.²⁰ Interestingly, *vata* is better supported with more sleep rather than less. *Vata* is also behind the tendencies to grind the teeth, sleep walk, or talk in one's sleep.²¹ *Vata*-type dreams tend to be spacious and airy and often focus on movement, adventure, or being chased; *vata*-types dream a lot, but they frequently have trouble recalling their dreams.²² While *vata* can cause difficulty falling asleep, the classic *vata*-type sleep imbalance is to awaken during the night—unable to return to sleep. This is particularly common during *vata* time, from about 2–6 a.m.

If these *vata*-type patterns resonate with you, please see our resource on [Balancing Insufficient Sleep](#) for recommendations—including specific practices you can use to pacify *vata*, where appropriate.



Pitta-Type Sleep and Sleep Imbalances

Pitta-types generally sleep well, though somewhat lightly. They tend to prefer a firm bed and few covers, due to pitta's tendency to overheat.²³ Pittas crave a moderate amount of sleep—somewhere between vata and kapha, which is generally supportive of their physiological needs. However, pitta-types can easily forego sleep when they are preoccupied with a project or are up against a deadline. Pitta sleep is often disturbed by fiery, vivid, and active dreams, but pitta-types typically return to sleep easily if they are awakened.²⁴ Difficulty falling asleep is the classic pitta-type sleep disorder because pitta is elevated in the mind and in the atmosphere from about 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. This can activate the mind, stimulate ambition, and can completely overwhelm any desire to sleep. As a result, many pitta-types are night owls and can be incredibly productive at night.

If these pitta-type patterns resonate with you, please see our resource on [Balancing Insufficient Sleep](#) for recommendations—including specific practices you can use to pacify pitta, where appropriate.

Kapha-Type Sleep and Sleep Imbalances

Kapha-types are heavy sleepers, can generally sleep soundly anywhere, and are not easily disturbed or awakened. They adore being in bed and like to sleep more hours than any other type—preferably on a soft mattress, under an abundance of comforting, fluffy covers.²⁵ Interestingly, kapha-types actually need less sleep than vata- and pitta-types. Kapha dreams tend to be calm, smooth, watery, and emotional.²⁶ When out of balance, kapha tends to cause excessive sleep, a feeling of heaviness, sluggishness, and difficulty waking up. Kapha is elevated in the mind and in the atmosphere from about 6-10 a.m./p.m., which can increase kapha's natural heaviness and sluggishness, making it easy for kapha-types to sleep for many extra hours.

If these kapha-type patterns resonate with you, please see our resource on [Balancing Excess Sleep](#) for recommendations on how to balance excess kapha in the sleep cycle.

Finding Balance

While each dosha has a unique influence on sleep patterns and imbalances, quality sleep is equally important for all of us. Ayurveda can help us to discover our natural tendencies and to distinguish those from our particular vulnerabilities toward various sleep imbalances.

In addition, Ayurveda has a great deal to say about how to support balanced sleep in general. Often, simple adjustments to routine, exercise, diet, and lifestyle habits can have a profound impact on sleep. In fact, in today's world, where sleep disorders abound, Western medicine is embracing many of Ayurveda's lifestyle strategies in the treatment of sleep disorders. Specific herbs can also be used to support a return to balance. An Ayurvedic practitioner can be incredibly helpful in identifying the most potent strategies for your individual situation. That said, our remedy guides are specifically designed to help you begin to understand and correct your current imbalances. Simply choose whether your tendency is to be deprived of sleep or to get too much of it.



Keep in mind that you do not have to be experiencing disordered sleep now in order to begin to correct the imbalances that underlie your tendencies. Ayurveda is a holistic approach to wellness that can help us to correct the root cause of our imbalances at any time—whether we are currently experiencing symptoms or not.

Suffering from insufficient sleep (or is this your tendency)?

Please see our guide to [Balancing Insufficient Sleep](#).

Sleep too much (or is this your tendency)?

Please see our guide to [Balancing Excess Sleep](#).

We wish you the best as you learn to support your daily rhythms and balance your sleep cycle with the wisdom of Ayurveda.



References

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²⁰ *Sebastian Pole, Ayurvedic Medicine: The Principles of Traditional Practice (London: Churchill Livingstone, 2006), 32.*

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²⁴ *Pole, Ayurvedic Medicine, 32.*

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²⁶ *Ibid.*



Balancing Insufficient Sleep

The Ayurvedic Approach



Each of us has suffered a restless night at some point in our lives. We've all occasionally sacrificed sleep for a cram session before an exam, or an important deadline. Many of us also know the feeling of losing sleep due to an intense emotional upset or the accumulation of stress or anxiety. For some of us, loss of sleep is short-lived; for others, it is chronic and we've come to anticipate losing sleep on a regular basis.

Insomnia can be caused by elevated or chronic stress, illness, physical discomfort, environmental factors, changes in our schedules, side effects from prescribed medications, depression, anxiety, and many other factors.¹ Insomnia 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 difficulty sleeping. Regardless of its origins, losing sleep is hard on our bodies and can be difficult to cope with—even at the acute level. When sleep loss becomes a regular occurrence, it tends to trap us in a vicious downward spiral that can have far-reaching effects on our well-being. We're exhausted, we're taxed mentally, physically, and emotionally, and our judgment is often painfully impaired. We want nothing more than to sleep, but we're often afraid that we won't be able to. And unfortunately, the fear itself can compound anxiety and stress, further inhibiting our ability to surrender to sleep.



Serious Consequences

Our bodies crave sleep for good reason and there are actually serious health risks associated with sleep loss, which can have complicated effects on both the physiology and the mind.

Sleep Deprivation:²

- Impairs judgment.
- Negatively affects our moods and emotions.
- Increases the risk of accidents.
- Impairs cognitive ability (dumbs us down).
- Decreases libido.
- Increases incidence of depression (by five times that of the normal population).
- Accelerates aging in the skin.
- May cause weight gain and obesity (and makes losing weight more difficult).
- Is linked to diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and early mortality.
- Increases the risk of death.

A Ray of Hope

Whether you have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, sleep loss can feel maddening, debilitating, and sound sleep can seem further out of reach with each restless night. 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 the fretful anticipation of sleeplessness that so often accompanies insomnia and instead focus on real and meaningful tools for balancing our sleep cycles.

The Ayurvedic Perspective

When it comes to insomnia, either *vata* or *pitta* is usually involved in the imbalance (and sometimes both). *Pitta* typically interferes with our ability to fall asleep while *vata* tends to cause interrupted sleep, and a tendency to awaken without being able to return to sleep. But it is equally important to understand which of the twenty *gunas* (or qualities) are involved in the imbalance.

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. *Vata* and *pitta* however, naturally share elements of the light, mobile, subtle and clear qualities—all of which oppose and counteract the very energies necessary for sound sleep. Further, both *vata* and *pitta* tend to trigger upward moving energy in the body whereas sleep is supported by downward moving energy. Therefore, when excess *vata* or *pitta* are active just before (or at any point during) the sleep cycle, they can leave us feeling active, mentally alert, especially sensitive to subtle changes in our environment, utterly preoccupied with racing—or even well-organized—thoughts, and we



become prone to insomnia. While there are certainly subtle differences between vata and pitta types of insomnia, the two do not require entirely different treatment strategies. In fact, it can be very clarifying to understand the universal patterns and, where appropriate, to highlight the nuanced variations in correcting one or the other type of insomnia.

Whether it is caused by vata, pitta, or a combination of the two, the Ayurvedic approach to balancing insomnia is largely focused on helping the system to return to balance by opposing any sleep-disrupting influences with their opposites. But simultaneously, we must support the body's natural circadian rhythms, while quieting the nervous system in the interest of reducing stress and returning to a healthier baseline state of calm. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a natural and easeful transition into sleep, and to be able to maintain that state until the body is fully rested.

Supporting Quality Sleep

The following recommendations work to balance sleep cycles by quieting and grounding the mind, emphasizing the heavy, slow, and stable qualities in ways that specifically support sleep, embracing a daily routine that awakens our natural biological rhythms, and by reducing stress and tension in the mind and body. These strategies subdue the excess lightness, clarity, subtlety, mobility, and upward movement that so often interfere with balanced sleep. It is also important to tend to *agni* (the metabolic fire), which Ayurveda recognizes as the foundation of optimal health. Many of the strategies below naturally support agni and help to clear toxins—emotional and otherwise. For more detailed information on agni and how to care for it in your system, see our resource on [The Importance of Healthy Digestion](#).

Focus on Establishing a Daily Routine

Encouraging a sense of consistency in our rhythms and routines fosters a certain stability that is not only grounding, but is also deeply reassuring to the nervous system. In the context of the fast-paced modern world where stress and anxiety run rampant, a routine provides an important foundational level of support for a calmer mind, a more relaxed nervous system, and better sleep. It also helps us to align with the natural rhythms of the day, and offers a certain predictability that is very supportive of our physiology. 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. If this concept is new to you, you might appreciate exploring our [Daily Routine Department](#).

If you don't have a routine and just want to start with the basics, consider committing to a consistent bedtime and wake time (even on the weekends). If you're feeling even more ambitious, try to eat your meals at the same time each day. If your work schedule varies, you can also try to maintain more consistent work hours from one day to the next.

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 instrumental in supporting sound sleep.



Before Bed, Consider:³

Taking a bath.

A bath relaxes the nervous system, releases tension, and helps to quiet the mind. Use hot water for vata, warm water for pitta.

Having a cup of boiled milk or chamomile tea.

These drinks are grounding and soothing in nature. If you like, add a pinch of nutmeg, cardamom, and some ghee to the milk.

Massaging your feet and scalp with warm oil.

This practice is grounding, supports downward moving energy, and helps to soothe the mind. If you massage your scalp, be sure use a towel or some other means of protecting your pillow from the oil. [Sleep Easy Oil](#) is balancing for vata and pitta; it helps to calm the mind and soothe the nervous system in support of healthy sleep patterns, deep rest, and improved relaxation. [Sesame Oil](#), and [Vata Massage Oil](#) are also good for vata. And for pitta, [Sunflower Oil](#), and [Pitta Massage Oil](#) are great choices, too.

Upon Waking, Consider:

Abhyanga (Ayurvedic self-massage with oil).

This practice is very grounding and nurturing. It helps to calm the nervous system and is a very potent practice of self-love. For more information and for help determining which oils would be best for you at this time, please see our resource on [Ayurvedic Self-Massage](#).

A morning routine that sets a calm and clarifying tone for the new day.

Supportive practices might include a morning shower, a gentle morning walk, or a few minutes of [meditation](#), [yoga](#), or [pranayama](#).

Practice Good Sleep Hygiene

The following practices further foster healthy circadian rhythms. Many of them are time-tested Ayurvedic suggestions that are now being embraced by modern medicine in the treatment of sleep disorders. 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. In addition, the bedroom should be conducive to sleep in every way possible. The temperature, the lighting (or level of darkness), the noise level, and the humidity are all potentially supportive or disruptive to sleep.⁴ Wherever possible, adjust the environment to meet your preferences and needs. Vata-types tend to favor warmer temperatures, softer bedding, ample covers, a nightlight, and adequate humidity. On the other hand, pitta-types usually prefer cooler temperatures, fewer covers, a firmer bed, total darkness, and less humidity. In cases where the noise level is disruptive, white noise may be beneficial for either vata or pitta imbalances. It is important to honor whatever works best for you. Ultimately, you need to feel comfortable in the sleep environment you create for yourself. 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 improving sleep, 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.⁵ When struggling with insufficient sleep, it is best to eliminate them entirely (or as much as possible) from your lifestyle.

Eliminate bedtime reading.

Reading before bed is very stimulating—especially to the eyes and the mind—is particularly pitta-provoking, and can interfere with sound sleep. It is best to avoid reading in bed, and you might consider eliminating reading from your evening routine altogether.

Eat a wholesome dinner early in the evening.

A heavy dinner can interfere with our ability to sleep.⁶ The best evening meals are healthy, nourishing, easily digestible, and are eaten at least three hours prior to retiring to bed.



What If I Can't Sleep?

If you find yourself unable to sleep, it is better to get up than to force yourself to stay in bed. We want to learn to associate bed with restful sleep, not with the struggle to beat insomnia. For some, getting up and making a to-do list helps to clear the preoccupations of the mind and can be very helpful. If you find this to be the case, get in the habit of making the list before you go to bed each night. For others, a cup of tea or hot milk will do the trick. Still others enjoy taking a little time for a grounding meditation or *pranayama* practice (yogic breathing exercises). You'll find what works for you, but only return to bed when you feel sleepy and genuinely ready to surrender to sleep.

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 (which is essential to optimal health), improves digestion, bolsters the body's detoxification mechanisms, encourages proper elimination, promotes relaxation in the body, and supports sound sleep.⁷ However, improper exercise can disturb sleep. For instance, exercising too close to bedtime can be overly stimulating.⁸ Ayurveda says that the best times of day to exercise are from 6–10 a.m./p.m. However, in cases of insomnia, an evening workout should be completed at least two to three hours before bedtime.⁹ Vata and pitta actually have somewhat different needs when it comes to exercise, so it is also important to choose an activity regimen that is appropriate for your particular imbalances.

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

- Make sure that your exercise routine is not overly stimulating, but gentle and grounding instead. Favor activities like walking, hiking, gentle cycling, yoga, or chi gong.
- If you practice yoga, practice [vata-pacifying yoga](#) or a handful of slow and purposeful [Sun Salutations](#) each morning.

To balance pitta, observe a pitta-pacifying exercise routine:

- Make sure that exercise is not overly intense, but do it with relaxed effort instead. Enjoy activities like walking, hiking, light jogging, swimming, cycling or yoga in the morning or evening (when it is coolest), and try to breathe through your nose the entire time.
- If you practice yoga, practice [pitta-pacifying yoga](#) or a series of gently-paced and purposeful [Moon Salutations](#) each morning.

Reduce and Manage Stress

Because stress is so often a factor in disturbed sleep cycles, it is imperative that we reduce our exposure to stress wherever possible. That said, chronic stress tends to ramp up the stress response so that our bodies react to even benign situations as if they were profoundly threatening.¹⁰ Ayurveda recommends a number of subtle therapies like meditation, pranayama, and yoga as an effective means of breaking this cycle, resetting the nervous system, and cultivating a healthier physiological response to stress. If you would like more in-depth support, please see our health guide on the topic, [An Ayurvedic Guide to Stress Management](#).



Meditation

If you do not have a meditation practice, something simple like [Empty Bowl Meditation](#) is a great place to start.

Pranayama

[Full Yogic Breath](#), [Ujjayi](#), [Nadi Shodhana](#), and [Bhramari](#) are especially supportive of the mind, the nervous system, and sleep. Most of these 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 experience of stress and our overall state of mind. In addition, a few minutes of [Bhramari](#) in the evening can help to settle the system and encourage sound sleep.

Yoga

A gentle grounding practice will typically be best for countering insomnia. If vata is the main issue, favor [vata-pacifying yoga](#). If pitta is the predominant force in your imbalance, [pitta-pacifying yoga](#) will be best. In either case, practice during the morning will help to set the tone for a more easeful day. Any practice done in the evening should be as gentle and quieting as possible. Favor restorative poses at this time.

Consider the Addition of Supportive Herbs

There are a number of Ayurvedic herbs that can help to balance vata and pitta, encouraging healthier sleep patterns. Some bolster the nervous system, others encourage an improved relationship with stress, some reduce excess vata or pitta throughout the system, and still others help to promote that grounding, downward moving energy that is so essential to sound sleep.

Generally Supportive Herbs

[I Sleep Soundly](#) is a formula specifically designed to support sound sleep. These tablets help the muscles to fully relax so that the body can physically surrender to sleep. At the same time, this formula helps to soothe the mind and nervous system in support of quality sleep.

[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 pitta and it helps to calm vata in the mind. [Brahmi/Gotu Kola liquid extract](#) is also available.

Herbs for Balancing Vata

[Ashwagandha](#) has long been revered for its ability to support the body in resisting stress while calming the mind. As a highly regarded adaptogen, Ashwagandha supports quality energy throughout the day and sound sleep at night. [Ashwagandha tablets](#) and [liquid extract](#) are also available.



Healthy Vata tablets help to balance vata throughout the system, supporting overall health and well-being.

Vata Digest tablets help to remove excess vata from the digestive tract in support of agni, which is essential to optimal health. If you prefer a powder, **Hingvastak** is the powdered form of this formula; it can be taken alone or sprinkled on your food like pepper.

Herbs for Balancing Pitta

Healthy Pitta tablets help to balance pitta throughout the system, supporting overall health and well-being.

Pitta Digest tablets help to remove excess pitta from the digestive tract in support of agni, which is essential to optimal health. If you prefer a powder, **Avipattikar powder** is a traditional Ayurvedic formula with very similar qualities and effects.

Finding Your Unique Path Toward Balance

While Ayurveda offers a number of effective tools for balancing insomnia, 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 sleep deprivation.

While insomnia can certainly be a frustrating and debilitating condition to live with, 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 in finding your way to sound sleep and vibrant health.



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Balancing Excess Sleep

The Ayurvedic Approach



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.¹



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.² 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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 exercise⁹—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.



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