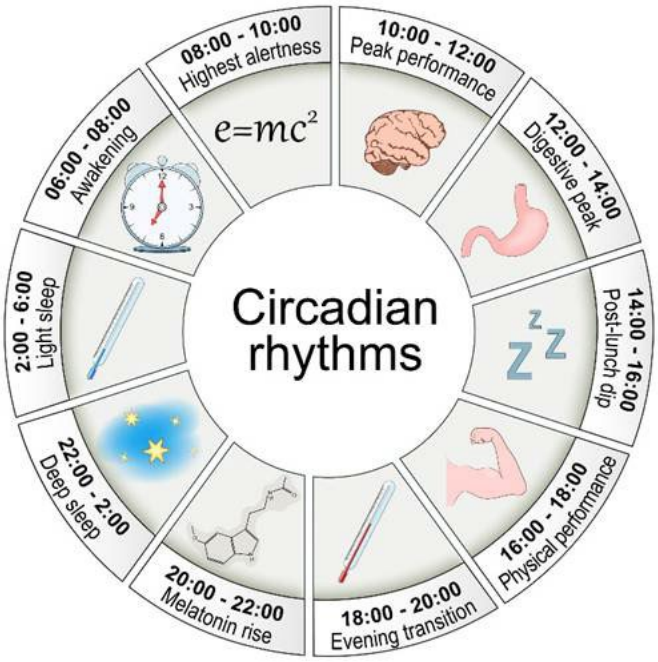
Sleep Hygiene & Evening Rituals: Client Guide



1. What is Sleep Hygiene?

Sleep hygiene refers to the daily habits, behaviors, and environmental factors that support consistent, high-quality nighttime sleep and daytime alertness.

In a clinical context, sleep hygiene is about creating an environment and routine that supports your body's natural biological clock (circadian rhythm) and calms your nervous system.

2. The Core Goal: Consistency Over Perfection

The goal of sleep hygiene is not to achieve "perfect" sleep. Expecting perfect sleep can create pressure and performance anxiety around bedtime, which actually makes sleeping harder.

Instead, the goal is to create **consistent, calming habits** that help your body prepare for rest and make it easier to return to sleep when you wake up during the night.

3. Daily Habits That Support Better Sleep

A. Get Morning Natural Light

- **15 to 30 Minutes Daily:** Spend 15 to 30 minutes in natural outdoor sunlight soon after waking.

- **Set Your Biological Clock:** Morning sunlight signals your brain's biological clock that the day has started, triggering a natural internal timer that promotes melatonin release 12 to 14 hours later.

B. Move Your Body Regularly

- **Daily Movement:** Engage in regular daytime activity like walking, stretching, or swimming.
- **Timing:** Physical activity deepens slow-wave sleep. Aim to complete vigorous workouts earlier in the day or late afternoon so your core body temperature can cool down before bedtime.

C. Keep a Consistent Schedule

- **Wake-Up Anchor:** Wake up at the same time every day, seven days a week. Sleeping in significantly on weekends creates "metabolic jetlag" and disrupts your internal rhythm.
- **Handling Rough Nights:** If you had a terrible night of sleep, sleeping in for 30 to 60 minutes can take the edge off without disrupting your clock. Avoid sleeping in for 2 to 3 hours, which steals sleep drive from the coming night.
- **Consolidate Time in Bed:** Spend an appropriate amount of time in bed:
    - **If struggling with daytime fatigue:** Aim for a minimum of 8 hours in bed.
    - **If struggling with night awakenings:** Limit time in bed to 7 hours to keep sleep consolidated.
- **Napping:** Avoid long daytime naps. If exhausted, take a strategic 15-to-20-minute power nap between 1:00 PM and 3:00 PM.

D. Manage Stimulants, Alcohol, and Meals

- **Caffeine Math (Half-Life & Quarter-Life):** Caffeine has a half-life of 5 to 6 hours and a quarter-life of up to 12 hours. A cup of coffee (200 mg) at 8:00 AM leaves 100 mg in your system at 1:00 PM and 50 mg circulating at 6:00 PM. Discontinue caffeine (coffee, tea, soda, chocolate) by early afternoon.
- **Alcohol:** While alcohol induces initial drowsiness, it acts as a central nervous system disruptor, fragmented sleep, and raising heart rate in the second half of the night as your body metabolizes it.
- **Meals:** Avoid heavy, spicy, or high-sugar meals close to bedtime, as active digestion raises core body temperature and interferes with deep rest.

4. Evening Sleep Rituals

A **sleep ritual** is a series of small, repeated actions that signal to your brain that the day is winding down. Focus on a gentle routine rather than a rigid set of rules.



Key daytime and nighttime sleep hygiene practices. Source: VectorMine / Getty Images

60 Minutes Before Bed: Create the Transition

- **Dim Lights:** Lower household lighting to encourage natural melatonin production.
- **Stop Tasks:** Put away work, household chores, and planning activities.
- **Screen Buffer:** Turn off phones, tablets, and TVs or set them to quiet mode. Give yourself permission to transition from "doing" to "resting."



45 Minutes Before Bed: Relax Your Body

- **Warm Bath or Shower:** A warm bath or shower helps your body cool down afterward, signaling to your brain that it is time to sleep.
- **Comfortable Sleepwear:** Change into loose, breathable clothes (such as cotton or bamboo).

- **Gentle Movement:** Practice light stretching or gentle yoga to release physical muscle tension.

30 Minutes Before Bed: Quiet Your Mind

- **Restful Activities:** Read an easy, non-stimulating book, listen to soft music, or enjoy a warm caffeine-free tea (such as chamomile).
- **Avoid Stimulation:** Stay away from upsetting news, tense conversations, or intense mental tasks.

15 Minutes Before Bed: Release the Day's Worries

- **Brain Dump:** Write down any unfinished tasks or reminders for tomorrow so they do not loop in your mind.
- **Gratitude Practice:** Write down 1 to 3 small things that went well or that you feel grateful for today. Focusing on positive or neutral moments calms an overactive mind.
- **Self-Reassurance:** Remind yourself: *"I do not have to solve everything tonight. My job right now is simply to rest."*

5. Bedtime: Settling Into Rest

Use the same anchor cues each night (e.g., closing your book, dimming the bedside lamp, and taking 1 to 5 minutes for comfortable breathing).

- **Gentle Breathing:** Allow your breath to fall into a natural rhythm. Try to exhale slightly longer than you inhale (for example, inhale for 4 seconds, exhale for 6 seconds) for a few minutes without forcing the breath. If your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to your breathing.
- **Body Scan:** Slowly bring your attention from your feet up to your head. Notice sensations (warmth, tension, touch of the sheets) without needing to change them, allowing your muscles to unwind into the bed.

6. What to Do When You Wake Up at Night

1. **Adjust for Comfort:** If you feel uncomfortable or restless, adjust your bedding, switch on a fan, or keep a fresh glass of water nearby.
2. **Keep the Room Dim & Quiet:** Avoid turning on bright lights and do not check the time repeatedly or scroll through your phone.
3. **Don't Force Sleep:** If you feel frustrated or wide awake after 20 minutes, get out of bed. Sit in a cozy chair in a dimly lit room, engage in a quiet activity (like soft reading), and return to bed only when sleepy.
4. **Practice Self-Compassion:** Speak kindly to yourself when thoughts arise. Remind yourself: *"This is a difficult night, but resting quietly still helps my body. A poor night of sleep does not mean tomorrow is ruined, and I do not need to track every minute of sleep."*

7. Expanded Nighttime Checklist

Use this daily checklist to track and build your sleep habits:

Daytime & Environment Prep

- [ ] **Morning Light:** Spent 15–30 minutes in natural sunlight.
- [ ] **Daytime Movement:** Completed regular physical activity (walking, swimming, stretching).
- [ ] **Caffeine Cut-Off:** Stopped caffeine (coffee, tea, soda, chocolate) by early afternoon.
- [ ] **Alcohol & Dinner:** Avoided alcohol near bedtime and ate a light, non-spicy evening meal.
- [ ] **Bedroom Environment:** Prepared a cool, dark, and quiet bedroom.
- [ ] **Bedside Setup:** Placed water, a fan, or extra blankets nearby for comfort.

Evening Wind-Down Routine

- [ ] **60 Min Before Bed:** Dimmed household lights and stopped work/chores.
- [ ] **Digital Buffer:** Put away screens and switched phone to quiet/do-not-disturb mode.
- [ ] **45 Min Before Bed:** Took a warm shower/bath and changed into comfortable sleepwear.
- [ ] **Body Relaxation:** Performed gentle evening stretches or yoga.
- [ ] **30 Min Before Bed:** Enjoyed a calming activity (reading a light book, soft music, herbal tea).
- [ ] **15 Min Before Bed (Brain Dump):** Wrote down tomorrow's tasks or lingering worries to clear my mind.
- [ ] **Gratitude Practice:** Wrote down 1 to 3 things that went well or that I feel grateful for today.

In Bed & Middle-of-the-Night

- [ ] **Breathing Exercise:** Practiced slow breathing with longer exhales (1–5 minutes).
- [ ] **Body Scan:** Released muscle tension from feet to head.
- [ ] **Night Awakenings (if needed):** Kept lights dim, adjusted temperature, and avoided checking the time or phone.
- [ ] **Self-Compassion:** Reminded myself that quiet rest is still beneficial, even on difficult nights.

8. When to Seek Medical Assessment

While sleep hygiene and evening rituals support better sleep, certain symptoms warrant evaluation by a healthcare provider. Consult your physician if you experience:

- Loud, persistent snoring
- Gasping, choking, or pauses in breathing during sleep

- Restless legs or uncomfortable sensations in your legs relieved only by movement
- Ongoing, severe daytime fatigue despite spending adequate time in bed