

The Power of a Good Night's Sleep

Discover The Best Sleep
Positions for Your Body

Easy to Use Desktop
or
Mobile Versions

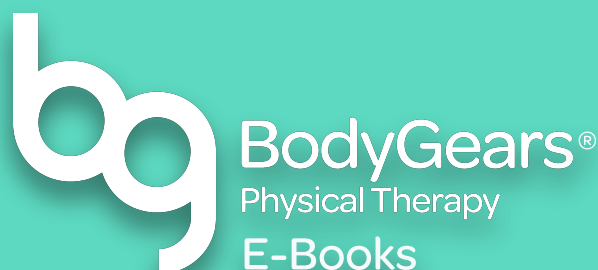


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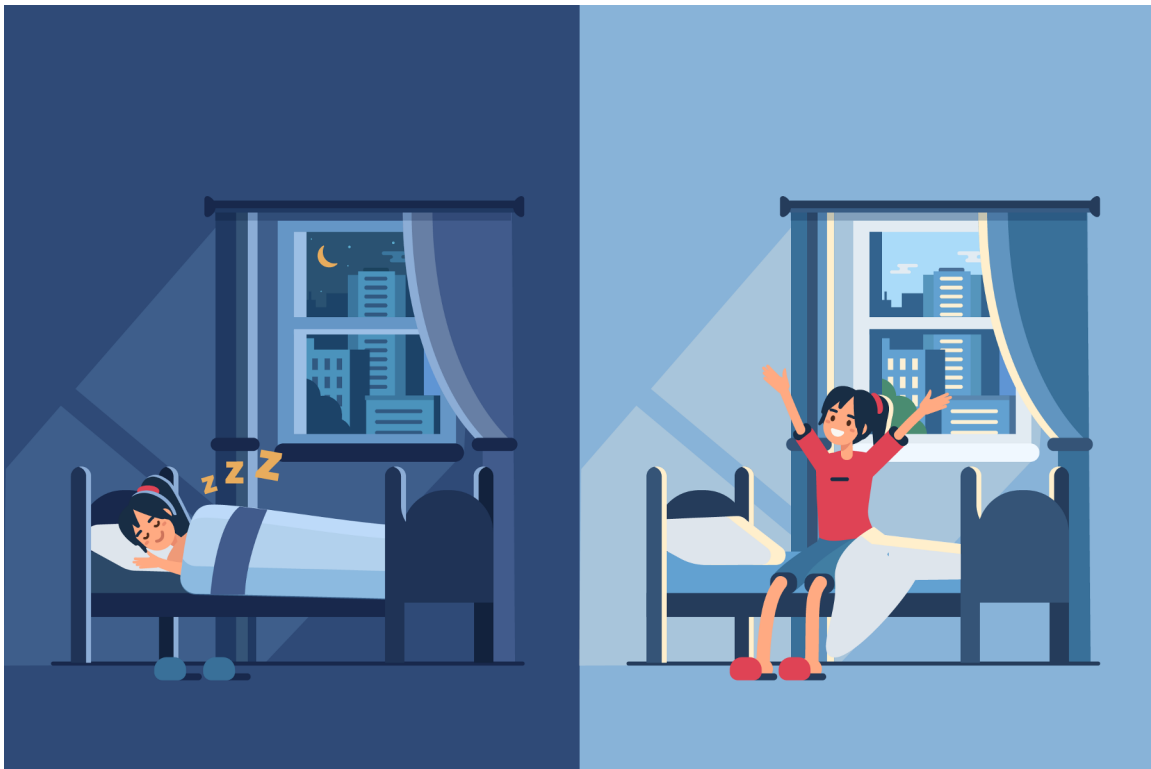
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Sleeping Postures & Headaches

Do you ever wake up from a night's sleep only to find yourself with a sore neck and a headache to boot? Or do you wake up at night because of headaches and neck pain with difficulty falling back asleep? In both of these situations, there is a good chance that your pillow placement and sleeping posture are to blame. Ensuring your neck is relaxed and unloaded from the weight of your head is key to increasing neck health and relieving headaches. It's natural to move around when you sleep or even sleep in different positions each night. Don't feel bound to choose only one position.



For more information, contact a Certified Functional Manual Therapist who has been trained on all of these concepts through the Institute of Physical Art's CoreFirst® Strategies course.

Step 1: Unload Your Neck

It's important to first unload the weight of your head from your neck. This allows your neck muscles and joints to relax over the course of the night and avoid the potential excess stress and strain that could be placed on these structures. To start, use the edge of your pillow to gently and fully fill the space where your neck meets your shoulders, right in your neck crease. Placing your pillow too far under your shoulders or not far enough under your neck will not unload the weight of your head properly and could cause shearing forces in your neck. Once your pillow is properly placed, check to see if there is space between the back of your neck and the pillow. If you can slide your hand under your neck without pressing your hand into the pillow, then your pillow is not fully supporting your head and neck. Scrunch up the edges of your pillow to fill this space behind your neck so it can completely relax into the support of the pillow.

Step 2: Find A Neutral Spine Position

Back Sleepers:

When you're lying on your back, it's important that your neck isn't bent too far forward or backward. If you feel like your chin is resting close to your chest, your pillow might be too thick. Find a smaller pillow and be sure to only use one pillow to avoid this excess neck flexion. If your chin is poking up towards the ceiling, you may need to alter your pillow positioning by raising both your head and neck higher off the bed so they're in line with your trunk. You may need a larger pillow or you may need to place a small towel underneath the back of your head to bring your neck out of an extended position.

Side Sleepers:

When you're lying on your side, your neck should remain as a continued extension of your spine. If your pillow is too thick, you may notice the top of your head lifting towards the ceiling. If your pillow is too thin, you may notice your head tilting towards the ground. Make sure your pillow is large enough to support your whole head and the area under your neck so that everything stays relatively parallel to the ground. If you can't find a pillow that works well for you, you can use a small folded towel to achieve this neutral position, ensuring the gap between your ear and shoulder is well supported.

Stomach Sleepers:

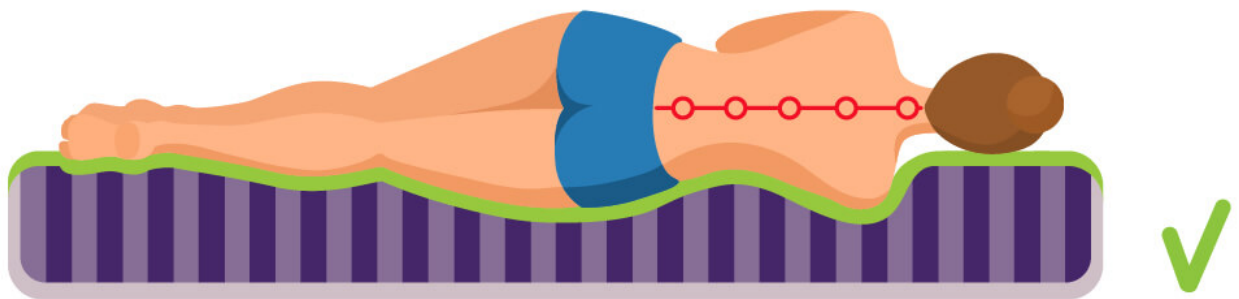
Stomach sleeping can be problematic for people who have ongoing neck pain. When you sleep on your stomach, your neck is rotated to its end range of motion and into an extended position. Keeping your head rotated all the way to one side can lead to increased feelings of neck stiffness and soreness when you wake up, which often increases the likelihood of developing a headache. Instead of lying fully on your stomach, try a modified sleeping posture in which you use pillows to support your legs and block your torso in a position halfway between side and stomach sleeping. This way, your neck won't be forced into its end range of rotation. Use the guidance from the Side Sleepers section to make sure you support your neck in a neutral position.

Whatever kind of sleeper you are, you can double check that your neck is neutral by asking a family member to take a look at your sleeping posture from behind. You can also take a picture or use a mirror if you want to confirm your positioning on your own.

Sleeping Postures & Back Pain

Step 1: Unload Your Neck

Everything you learned in the previous chapter is still important to implement whether you are experiencing headaches or back pain. Your spine is a continuous structure that enjoys being supported from the top to the bottom.



Step 2: Unload Your Shoulder

This step only applies to side sleepers. Most side sleepers don't lie with their top arm perfectly stacked over their waist. When you lie on your side, the weight of your top arm pulls your shoulder forward, creating thoracic spine rotation. This rotational stress can affect both your neck and your lower back. To avoid rotational stress, place a pillow in your underarm and rest your forearm at a similar height as your shoulder. You can use a pillow or you can use a rolled up towel, blanket, or even a big stuffed teddy bear.

Step 3: Unload Your Legs

Back Sleepers:

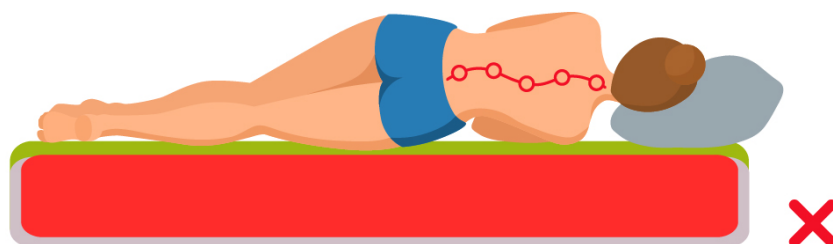
It may be hard to envision, but when you lie flat on your back, your lumbar spine can be pulled up and forward by the weight of your legs. There is a muscle called the psoas that connects from the front of your lumbar spine down to the front of your thigh bone. This muscle often becomes tight when you spend the majority of your day sitting. Sleeping with your legs and psoas unsupported may create a shearing force in your lumbar spine and likely contribute to your lower back pain. To avoid this, place a pillow underneath your **thighs** and another pillow underneath your **calves**. Most people only place one pillow underneath their knees but this doesn't support the heaviest part of your legs which are pulling on your spine the most. Make sure the first pillow starts at your buttocks and the second pillow is placed slightly underneath it at your calves, like shingles on a roof. If you are in a situation where you only have access to one extra pillow, then place it lengthwise starting from your buttocks so that it supports the length of both thighs down to your knees.

Side Sleepers:

Remember how the weight of your top arm creates a rotational pull on your thoracic spine if left unsupported? The weight of your legs creates the same kind of pull on your lower back. The back sleeper's principle of ensuring the heaviest part of your leg is supported first also applies to side sleepers. Your top leg should be parallel to the ground and supported by a pillow starting at your groin. You can use two pillows to support your entire leg down to your foot, but you should at least make sure your entire thigh is fully supported.

Step 4: Support Your Waist

This step only applies to side sleepers. If you look at someone laying on their side, you will see a series of peaks and valleys: head (peak), neck (valley), shoulder (peak), waist (valley), hip (peak), leg (valley).



The principle behind sleep positioning is to fill and support the valleys so that they can be more in line with the peaks. The result is sleeping with a more midrange spinal alignment instead of an S-shaped spine. To support your waist, fold a hand towel and place it the gap between your waist and the bed. People with small waists might even require a small pillow to fill the entire gap, but make sure your back doesn't start to curve up the other way towards the ceiling, as this can be uncomfortable.

Two very important points to remember:

1. The waist support should support, not extend under your ribs or hip.
2. A rolled towel under your waist creates a painful fulcrum and is typically uncomfortable. Use a folded towel instead.

Test it out for yourself! Lie how you usually would for at least 30 seconds. Then, position pillows as described above, lie there for another 30 seconds. Finally, return to your usual sleep posture. We'll bet that you'll want to sleep fully supported from now on!

Sleep Hygiene

As children, most of us grew up with a bedtime routine. Any parents of young children can tell you how important this is as a parenting tool. Just because there's no more story time when you get older, doesn't mean you should stop having a bedtime routine. Humans are creatures of habit and your body learns to expect certain things at certain times of the day. The same is true of sleep. If you struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep, then a bedtime routine can help to prepare your body and mind for better sleep.



3 Don'ts of Sleep Hygiene

1. No back-lit screens 30-60 minutes before bed
 - ▶ The blue light of your TV, computer, and cellphone mimic daylight and confuse the part of your brain conditioned to make you feel tired when it gets dark out.
2. No eating 2 hours before bed
 - ▶ If you rev up your metabolism, then you won't feel tired, especially if you just ate a lot of carbs that your body perceives as immediate fuel for activity.
3. No exercise 4 hours before bed
 - ▶ This does not include mobility or stretching exercises. Cardiovascular and strengthening exercises increase your metabolism, making you feel more awake. Save those exercises for the morning.

3 Do's of Sleep Hygiene

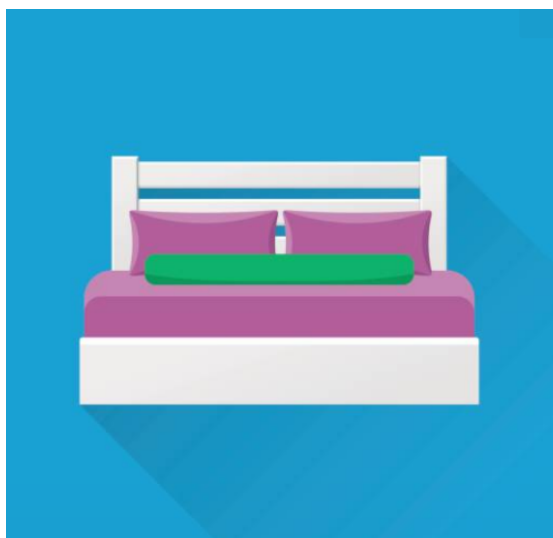
1. Go through the same routine every night
 - ▶ Be diligent but don't stress if you stay out late one night and miss your routine. You'll still be ok if you have a history of good sleep hygiene.
2. A personal hygiene routine makes for good sleep hygiene
 - ▶ Use the 30 minutes before bed to take care of yourself. Brush your teeth, wash your face, brush your hair, write, read, make lunch for tomorrow, whatever makes you feel good.
 - ▶ Note - try not to read or write in bed. Using your bed only for sleep will help to condition your body to fall asleep faster.
3. Make your sleep environment pleasant
 - ▶ Your bedroom should be cool, quiet, comfortable, and most importantly dark to promote a relaxing environment.



Choosing A Mattress & Pillows

If you are in the market for a new mattress, here are a couple pieces of advice that are good to keep in mind. Make a day out of it and give yourself time to test multiple mattresses. Focus on mattresses that achieve the same principles as pillow positioning: unloading the limbs that pull on the spine and evening out the peaks and valleys of your body. Sometimes mattresses with a continuous body (foam, gel) are better able to achieve this than spring mattresses where the springs might not line up perfectly with where you need support.

For some people, the best combination is a mattress that feels good along with the use of some or all of the pillow supports previously outlined. Do what works best for you because a full night of sleep is a vital component of good health. If you sleep best on a firm spring mattress, then go for it! Focus on using pillow supports to achieve a neutral sleep posture. If you're unsure of what works best for you, then try finding a mattress that offers a trial period and consult with your physical therapist.



About Body Gears Physical Therapy

Body Gears exists to enhance human mechanics, movement and performance, promoting a healthier quality of life and elevating you to your optimum self. It's our vision to help you discover a better life by redefining Physical Therapy.

At Body Gears, you will find some of the country's top Functional Manual Therapists who love problem-solving challenging cases. We achieve excellent results through study and collaboration.

Call to Schedule Your Free Discovery Session Today

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