

# Does Your Sleep Position Matter?

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How do you prefer to fall asleep — on your side, stomach, or back? Do you often pass out on the couch in front of the TV? Is your partner restless while you snore throughout the night? Maybe you don't give a lot of thought to how and where you fall asleep. But your sleep position and quality can impact your health.

## If you have sleep apnea



Obstructive sleep apnea is a serious disorder in which breathing repeatedly stops during slumber. Over time, this can damage the heart, lungs, and other organs and even lead to premature death. If you or your partner thinks you may have this condition, speak to your doctor, who can refer you to a specialist for evaluation and treatment options.

If diagnosed with sleep apnea, you can adjust your sleep positioning to help relieve snoring and promote more consistent respiration. “Positional therapy for obstructive sleep apnea is ideally prone positioning (sleeping on your stomach),” says Kori

Ascher, M.D., a pulmonologist and critical care physician with the University of Miami Health System who specializes in sleep medicine. “Or you can sleep on your side (left or right) and elevate your head using a wedge pillow or several pillows, or even sleep upright in a recliner.”

## **Isn't sleeping in a recliner bad for your neck and back?**

“Just because you're sleeping in a recliner doesn't mean you can't get quality sleep,” Dr. Ascher says. But, it can be problematic if you consistently wake up in the middle of the night to move to the bed. This interruption and physical activity can make it difficult to fall back asleep and wake feeling rested the next day.

Sleeping in a chair also increases the risk of resting against a folded arm or leg, limiting blood flow and triggering nerve compression. “Saturday Night Palsy is a well-known consequence of sleeping (often while intoxicated) in a position that compresses the radial nerve against a hard surface,” Dr. Ascher says. This prolonged nerve compression can cause wrist drop, numbness, and tingling that typically resolves on its own within days or months.

“The solution is to avoid any constricting positions when sleeping. But, there are no health consequences to sleeping in a recliner or an upright position.”

## **What about back support?**

“You can achieve proper sleep staging and architecture without sleeping on your back,” Dr. Ascher says.

“To support your spine, sleep on your side with a pillow between your slightly bent knees. Alternatively, if you prefer to sleep on your back, put a wedge pillow under both legs with your knees bent so your back is flat.”

## How to reduce snoring

If you suffer from snoring — well, if your partner suffers from your snoring — you’ve probably tried a few tricks to relieve it.

Dr. Ascher recommends sleeping on your stomach or your side and elevating your head slightly using a wedge pillow or several pillows. While this isn’t a cure for the causes of chronic snoring, these positions may help relieve it. “Snoring can be exacerbated by sleeping on your back (called supine positioning).”

## When managing acid reflux

When gastric juices rise in your chest and cause heartburn, the acidity can erode the esophageal lining and teeth enamel. “The chronic micro-aspiration of gastric compounds into the trachea and lower respiratory tract during sleep can contribute over time to pulmonary fibrosis,” Dr. Ascher says.

To help prevent this damage and discomfort while you sleep, elevate your head and chest using a wedge pillow or a pile of pillows. “This helps with postural drainage, allowing gastric juices to move toward the digestive tract,” she says.

## What’s the key to a good night’s sleep?

More important than your sleep position is maintaining healthy sleep habits.

- Get seven to eight hours of sleep each night.
- Set a consistent bedtime and wake time seven days per week.
- Establish a calming bedtime routine to prepare your mind and body for sleep.
- Avoid electronics (TV, computer screens, video games, and cell phones) around bedtime.

- Dim the lights and lower the room temperature an hour before your bedtime.
- Avoid eating, checking email, and hanging out in bed.
- Get sufficient physical activity during waking hours.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, smoking, and eating a few hours before bed to encourage deep, continuous sleep.

“These behaviors promote healthy sleep and proper sleep architecture,” Dr. Ascher says.

Getting enough quality sleep on a regular basis can help you maintain a healthy weight, uplift your mood, and support your brain and bodily functions. When you wake up feeling rested and ready to start your day, it can set the stage for productivity and overall wellness.

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