

Evening Air

More than any other sensory system, the olfactory nerves in the nose have a direct connection to the brain. Aromatherapy influences neurotransmitters in ways that induce relaxation and sleep. The best-studied scents for sleep are lavender, bergamot, chamomile, and cypress. Other scents are sometimes mixed into those evening oils, including geranium, mandarin, sweet marjoram, clary sage, ylang, eucalyptus, frankincense, rose, orange, jasmine, and rosemary (Hwang & Shin, 2015). Clients can use them before bed or throughout the night with an oil diffuser.

Hot Baths, Cold Rooms

Temperature is just as important as light in regulating the biological clock. A drop in temperature in the evening prompts the body to enter sleep. Clients with depression are less likely to respond to that prompt because depression elevates body temperature and prevents it from rising and falling with the circadian rhythm. Add to that the unchanging indoor climates that modern life has created through the wonders of HVAC, and we have a set up for insomnia. There are two ways to accentuate that prompt. Clients can take a hot bath one to two hours before bed, and sleep in a colder room. Both methods improve sleep.

A Hot Bath

A hot bath one to two hours before bed causes body temperature to fall overnight, setting in motion biological changes that ultimately deepen sleep. Clients should soak for 10-30 minutes, with the water covering their body from the neck down. The temperature should be as hot as they can comfortably touch, but not so hot that it's painful (104°F). Lower temperatures are relaxing but do not have a significant effect on sleep (Dorsey et al., 1999; Liao, 2002). To protect their skin, clients shouldn't stay in the bath for longer than 30 minutes and they should never let the temperature rise above 104°F. To accentuate the warming effect, clients can also drink a hot beverage before or during the bath, such as a relaxing, caffeine-free herbal tea (e.g., chamomile, valerian, or lavender).

Hot baths are not for everyone, and there are a few warnings to bear in mind, most importantly fainting or falls because blood pressure can drop when standing up from the tub. Clients with risk factors noted below should consult with their physician first. If a hot bath is not safe or feasible, a foot bath (soaking both feet in hot water for 20-30 minutes), hot shower, or infrared heating blanket might help.

If the hot bath works, the client will fall asleep easier and sleep deeper with fewer awakenings. Over time, it may improve depression as well. A hot bath may treat depression by reducing inflammation and reviving the brain's reward center. In particular, the results of an intriguing controlled study tested whether a hot bath twice a week could treat depression better than a fake version of light therapy, which was used as the placebo. After two months, the baths worked, and the effect was about as strong as what we see with antidepressants (Naumann et al., 2017).

A Hot Bath: The Risks

- **Falls and blood pressure drops.** Clients should consult with their physician if they have any of these risk factors: age over 65, dizziness, taking medicines that lower blood pressure, diabetes, or medical problems affecting the heart, lung, or kidneys.
- **Accidental drowning:** Clients should avoid alcohol, sleep medications, and sedatives both during and before taking a bath.
- **Skin burns, infection, and breakdown.** Hot baths should be avoided if there are any cuts to the skin, active skin disease, neuropathy or numbness, or any infection. They shouldn't stay in the bath for longer than 30 minutes or let the temperature rise above 104°F.
- **Fertility.** Pregnant women should avoid hot baths. Men attempting to conceive should also avoid them as they may temporarily lower the sperm count.
- **Children.** A hot bath is not appropriate for children, who should avoid water temperatures above 100°F.

A Hot Bath: Practical Tips

- Ideal water temperature: 104°F
- Use lower temperatures in that range for elderly clients.
- Clients can measure the water temperature with a “bath” or “pool” thermometer (\$5-10).
- The bath should cause an increase in body temperature: 1-3°F. This part is optional, but curious bathers can use an oral or ear thermometer to measure their body temperature before and at the end of the bath. Clients who prefer to warm themselves through other methods, like a heating pad or sauna, can check their temperature to make sure it rises 1-3°F during the process.
- To prevent falls, it’s best for clients to rise slowly and hold onto something firm while getting out of the tub. If clients experience any dizziness, they should sit for a minute or two before standing. A chair next to the tub can help.
- After the bath, clients should drink a small glass of water (2-4 ounces) to ensure hydration.
- Hot baths may be uncomfortable but should not be painful. Clients will likely break a sweat.

A Cold Room

Sleep doctors recommend lowering the room temperature to 60-65°F overnight and bundling up with blankets. That may be too cold for some, and there are always people who sleep better in a warm room, so this needs to be individualized. Clients can set a programmable thermostat to lower the temperature in the evening and get as close to the recommended temperature as they are comfortable. A rise in temperature helps wake people up, so clients should set it to rise in the 30-60 minutes before their alarm goes off. A fan is a good economical option on hot summer days, as it can effectively lower the temperature through the “wind chill factor.”

Can a Mattress Deepen Sleep?

A new mattress made out of fishing line is catching on in Japan. Called the high rebound mattress, it proposes to deepen sleep by lowering core body temperature through the night. Compared to a memory foam mattress, sleeping on the high rebound mattress made by Airweave deepened sleep by 25%. The high rebound mattress can be placed on top of a regular mattress and - despite its odd material - provides a comfortable rest (Chiba et al., 2018).