SLEEP: Up All Night

Sweet dreams, anyone?

With the demands of life now virtually 24/7, one of the best ways to protect your health is to call it a day and go to bed. Getting restful sleep – and enough of it – is vitally important to living as healthy as possible throughout your life. A lack of sleep, on the other hand, speeds up the aging process. And you probably don’t need a group of researchers to tell you that too little shut-eye can also affect your mood, mental performance and physical well-being.

So, What Is Sleep?

Sleep is an altered state of consciousness where your body does a lot of important work. There’s a general decrease in your temperature, blood pressure, breathing rate and most other bodily functions. However, because the brain never slows down its activity, sleep is also an energy-intensive process.

There are two basic theories on why we need sleep:

1. It’s restorative. Sleep enables our body and mind to refresh, re-energize and restore. During this time, the brain takes care of “housekeeping” tasks: organizing long-term memory, processing new information, and repairing and renewing tissues and nerve cells.

2. It’s adaptive. Sleep may have evolved as a means of protection, allowing us to find food during the daytime and hide at night.

A Word About Sleep Apnea

If you’re getting at least 7½ hours of sleep and still feel tired the next day, talk to your physician about sleep apnea, a common disorder that disrupts sleep. Sleep apnea is associated with:

- Loud snoring
- Daytime fatigue
- Excess weight
- A neck circumference greater than 17 inches
- High blood pressure
- Periods when you stop breathing during sleep
- A headache in the morning
- Insomnia

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How Much Sleep Do We Need?

Adequate sleep is necessary for a healthy body. Without enough, our ability to perform simple tasks nosedives – we may slow down, become irritable, be less alert and have a hard time concentrating, in addition to feeling drowsy during the day. Lack of sleep also affects our immune system; the body responds to too little slumber in much the same way as when it’s fighting off an infection.

Studies suggest we should get 7½ to 9 hours of sleep each night; however, some sleepers just naturally require more or less rest. Exactly how much has a lot to do with age:

- People under 18 years of age typically need more sleep, especially the younger the person
- People over 55 need 7½ to 9 hours of sleep or their immune system will be weakened

What’s your sleep requirement?

A great time to find out is when you’re on vacation. Once you’ve had time to get fully rested, some experts suggest allowing yourself to wake up without an alarm clock – the amount of time you spent sleeping would be your personal requirement. Others simply state the obvious: An ideal amount is the hours you need to feel refreshed and well-rested in the morning, and alert all day.

Sleep and Weight

Studies show that people who get five hours or less of sleep each night are much more prone to weight gain. This is primarily because a lack of sleep affects two hormones that stimulate the appetite:

**Gherlin**
- A hormone produced in the stomach that sends signals to the brain that your body is hungry
- Levels are higher when you lose sleep

**Leptin**
- A hormone produced by fat cells that sends a signal to the brain that you are full
- You have lower levels when you’re sleep deprived

High gherlin and low leptin levels “tell” your body to eat. Sleep-deprived people have increased cravings for sweet, fatty and salty foods – plus, because they spend more hours awake, they have more opportunities to eat. To make matters worse, because they’re tired from too little sleep, they are also less likely to have the energy to go to the gym or get some other form of exercise. As a result, these people tend to gain weight.

How Long Should It Take to Fall Asleep?

The following guidelines will give you some idea how you are doing:

- Less than 5 minutes: Exhaustion; you are not getting enough quality sleep
- 5 – 15 minutes: This is a healthy amount of time to fall asleep
- 15 – 30 minutes: Stress may be interfering with your sleep; you need to do something to help wind down before bedtime
- 30 – 60 minutes: Insomnia; try 20 minutes of deep breathing or muscle relaxation
- 60+ minutes: It’s time to see your physician or a sleep specialist.
Sleep Cycles

There are five stages of sleep, and you can cycle up to 5-7 times through each stage every night. Each cycle lasts 45-90 minutes; it takes 7½ to 9 hours to get through all of the normal cycles.

Some people have shorter or longer cycles than normal. When the sleep cycle is shorter than 45 minutes, people typically wake in the middle of the night and can have trouble going back to sleep. When the sleep cycle is longer than 90 minutes, the body is unable to cycle enough times to be replenished, which often makes it difficult to get up in the morning.

If you miss just a single sleep cycle, you deprive your body of the important healing time required for good energy!

Stages of Sleep

Sleep is roughly divided into rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is associated with dreaming, and four stages of non-REM sleep. Each of the five stages is vitally important to good health.

Stage 1 is the “dozing” stage, a transitional period of light sleep. In this non-REM sleep stage, you can be easily awakened; sometimes you don’t even know you’re asleep. Just 5 percent of sleep is spent in this stage.

Stage 2 is light sleep; you struggle between being awake and fully asleep. About 45 percent of sleep is spent in Stage 2. During this non-REM stage, eye movement stops and brain waves become longer.

Stage 3 is deeper sleep. At this point, you are more difficult to wake. The mind is blank and hormones begin to be released. About 12 percent of sleep occurs in this non-REM stage.

Stage 4 is the deepest stage of sleep. In this non-REM phase – about 13 percent of sleep – hormones peak, and your body releases growth hormone necessary for body repair and immunity. If you wake during this phase, you feel groggy and disoriented for several minutes.

Stage 5 is rapid eye movement sleep. Roughly 20-25 percent of your sleep cycle is spent in REM sleep. In REM, brain waves are similar to an awakened state. Your eyelids flutter and you experience muscle paralysis and irregular breathing. Body temperature, heart rate and blood pressure are different than at other times. During this stage, the brain sends signals to the muscles to remain immobile so that you don’t act out your dreams. It’s also during REM that your body processes the emotions you’ve experienced in the previous 72 hours.

Medications that Can Keep You Awake

Although we often don’t make the connection, sleeplessness is a side-effect of many prescription and over-the-counter medications. To be sure, read the labels – or ask your doctor or pharmacist how the drugs you take can affect your sleep.

Non-prescription Drugs
- Decongestants
- Nicotine
- Antihistamines (may cause sleepiness, too)
- Stimulants
- Alcohol
- Caffeine

Prescription Drugs
- Stimulants
- “Coming off” of sedatives
- Diuretics (including drugs to lower blood pressure)
- Corticosteroids
- Many antidepressants
### TRY THESE TACTICS TO WELCOME PEACEFUL SLUMBER:

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<th>Action</th>
<th>Reason</th>
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<td>Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day – even on weekends. Don’t “sleep in” to make up for prior sleep loss, as it only contributes to the insomnia cycle.</td>
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<td>Follow a regular bedtime routine. Dim the lights in your home as bedtime approaches. Calming rituals like a warm bath, soft music, meditation and reading can help your body relax and prepare for sleep.</td>
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<td>Avoid work and worry as you prepare for sleep.</td>
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<td>Get plenty of exercise in the mornings or mid-day. However, avoid strenuous activity two hours before bedtime, which can increase your alertness and energy level, making it difficult for you to relax and fall asleep.</td>
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<td>Avoid long naps in the late afternoon and early evening because they can leave you feeling wakeful when it’s time for bed.</td>
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<td>Don’t work, read, eat or watch television in bed – use your bed only for sleeping and intimacy, so your body associates it with rest.</td>
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<td>When you get into bed, focus on calming your body. Imagine your muscles relaxing and each individual body part becoming warm and soft. Start by thinking about relaxing your toes, then work your way up your legs, through your trunk, to your arms, shoulders, neck and head.</td>
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<td>Invest in a good quality mattress. One that is too firm or that sags in the middle is not just uncomfortable, but it can also be tough on your back.</td>
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<td>Maintain ideal sleep conditions:</td>
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<td>• Block out distracting noise, using ear plugs if necessary. “White noise,” though, such as the sound of a running fan, can actually be restful.</td>
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<td>• Eliminate as much light as possible, since as few as eight watts of light can prevent you from sleeping.</td>
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<td>• Adjust the room temperature to a cool but comfortable level. A room that is too hot or too cold can keep you awake; 68° F is the optimal sleeping temperature.</td>
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<td>In the four hours before bedtime, avoid or limit substances and foods that interfere with sleep. Alcohol, beverages with caffeine, chocolate, sugar-filled foods, spicy foods and tobacco can affect your body’s ability to fall asleep or enjoy deep, restful sleep.</td>
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<td>Quiet any hunger pangs with a light snack, such as fruit or a piece of toast.</td>
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<td>Limit liquids. Frequent trips to the restroom can interrupt your sleep cycles, limiting deep/restorative sleep.</td>
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<td>Avoid using sleeping pills long term. They may become less effective after 2–4 weeks of consecutive use. They may also make you feel sleepy when it’s time to wake up.</td>
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