



Sleep: A Wake-Up Call

BY KRISTI BIRCH

If you love sleep and you're not getting enough of it, you're not alone. Thanks largely to a 24/7 lifestyle, Americans average only 6 hours, 40 minutes of sleep a night during the week and 7.5 hours on weekends, according to the National Sleep Foundation. And the problem is not unique to the Western world. According to a 2005 *Journal of Sleep Medicine* article, the Japanese average only 6 hours and 53 minutes per night.

Americans haven't always been so sleep-deprived. People averaged 8.5 hours a night in 1960, according to the American Cancer Society. "We know that for each of the last few decades, the average amount of sleep has dropped, on average, half an hour," says Dr. Charlene Gamaldo, assistant director of the Johns Hopkins Hospital Sleep Disorders Center. Most of us would love to catch a few extra zzzs.

And we should. Sleep matters. When you sleep, the cells in your body produce proteins, which enable cells to grow and repair themselves. That's why a lack of sleep not only makes you grumpy and unable to concentrate, but can also damage your immune and endocrine system. Recent studies have shown that a sleep deficit can increase your risk for different cancers, high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. It's also been linked with injuries and death. Drowsy drivers cause more than 100,000 car crashes and 1,500 deaths a year in the United States, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. And the National Sleep Foundation reports that according to data from Australia, England, Finland and other European nations, all of whom have more consistent crash reporting procedures than the United States, tired drivers represent the cause of 10 to 30 percent of all crashes.

Poor sleep also has been linked to obesity, because sleep deprivation can affect your metabolism. "Your body sees the deprivation as a stress response, so your body wants calorie-dense food and you crave things like carbs," says Gamaldo. "And with the craving for calorie-dense food, it seems that the thyroid also gets turned down, so the food isn't burned efficiently and is stored as fat."

Tips for Better Sleep

- Establish consistent sleep and wake schedules, even on weekends.
- Create a regular, relaxing bedtime routine such as soaking in a hot bath or listening to soothing music. Begin an hour or more before the time you expect to fall asleep.
- Create a sleep-conducive environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.
- Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex (keep "sleep stealers" out of the bedroom — avoid watching TV, using a computer or reading in bed).
- Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows.
- Finish eating at least two to three hours before your regular bedtime.
- Exercise regularly during the day or at least a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol products close to bedtime and give up smoking.

Source: National Sleep Foundation

But how much sleep do you really need? The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends 7.5 to 8.5 hours, but needs vary by individual, and some people fall outside that range in both directions. And don't believe the common misconception that you'll need less sleep when you enter your golden years. "As we get older, our ability to drop into a deep sleep isn't as good, and we wake up easier," says Gamaldo. "But our sleep requirement remains the same."

To determine how much sleep is right for you, pay attention to how you feel with different levels of shut-eye. Are you sleepy during the day? Are you drowsy while driving? Do you need caffeine as a pick-me-up?

If you feel tired and experimenting with longer sleep periods doesn't help, consider seeing your doctor or going to a sleep clinic to be evaluated for a sleep disorder. *The Journal of Sleep Medicine* study reports that one in four individuals worldwide do not think they sleep well. Sleep-robbing problems such as restless leg syndrome, chronic insomnia or sleep apnea, a common condition in which a person stops breathing for a few seconds hundreds of times a night, are treatable disorders. "Still, the No. 1 cause of people being sleepy is just not getting enough sleep," says Gamaldo.

And while napping might help, Gamaldo recommends no more than 20 to 40 minutes at a stretch. If you nap



longer, she says, you can drop into deep sleep and it will be harder to fall asleep at night.

Also, don't assume that you can miss a lot of sleep during the week and then "catch up" on weekends. Many researchers believe that this still may not be as effective as getting the proper amount of sleep every night.

Although there are medications to help you sleep, Gamaldo recommends that, in addition to making sure you don't have a sleep disorder, also try to deal with environmental problems first. The doctor says she hears a litany of sleep-busting problems from patients: a significant other who snores, a pet in the bed, lighting up a cigarette (a stimulant) right before lights-out. And these days, many people are on the computer at night, or watching TV late.

"Any stimulation or light through the TV or computer makes your brain think you shouldn't be ready for bed," says Gamaldo. "Curtail the computer use for an hour before bed, and limit the TV use, too." [See sidebar for more tips.]

Sleep is important to feeling good and staying healthy. Gamaldo says that too often, people assume they just have to live with sleep problems when they are treatable. "You should never be resigned to poor quality sleep," she says. ■

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