

Not-So-Simple Sleep

Sleep appears so simple: lie down, close your eyes, and doze. But sleep can be a complicated matter!

Why should I take a nap?

If you left behind your nap mat when you left kindergarten, it may be time to unroll this healthy habit again. Naps may seem like toddler territory, but a well-timed nap can be restorative. **A simple nap can help you avert afternoon energy slumps better than caffeine. It can also increase your alertness, elevate your mood, and improve your memory.**

Warm temperatures and food can lull you into that classic sleepy afternoon mood, but there may be something about our bodies' sleep cycle that makes a nap so essential. As we flow through each day's asleep-awake cycle, we reach peaks and dips of energy. Like most mammals, humans experience two periods of forceful, persuasive sleepiness: around 2-4 am and then again at 1-3 pm. Sound like a familiarly dozy time of day?

Sleep stretches out across 5 distinctive stages. A nap allows you to grab some of the benefits of the sleep cycle without committing to a full 8 hours. Keep in mind, though, that a nap is not a substitute for getting a good night's sleep.

Stage 1: Stage one encompasses those first 5 to 10 minutes of sleep, when your eyes close and you begin your descent into slumber. This is the time in which if someone were to wake you, you might look up and ask, "Was I asleep just then?" Catch even a super-quick nap, and you're still likely to improve your chances of remembering something you just learned or memorized.

Stage 2: Stage two finds you 20 to 30 minutes or so into sleep, preparing for deeper sleep. It is during stage two that your heart rate slows down, your body temperature decreases, and your muscles progressively become more relaxed. It's here that you'll hit the pinnacle of the so-called "power nap". A nap of about 30 minutes can offer you the boost of energy and concentration you need to get through the rest of the afternoon.

Stages 3-4: Should you sleep into the 45-minute range, you float into slow-wave sleep. This deep, enveloping sleep state bolsters your *declarative memory*, the ability to remember facts and explain them. But waking from this deeper sleep can wrap you in a bleary, disorienting cloud that's tough to emerge from. To avoid this *sleep inertia*, save this kind of deep nap for when you're unwell or just really need to rest.

Stage 5: Once you doze into the 90-120 minute range, you're in the realm of dreams and rapid eye movement (REM). Your heart rate and respiration will pick up again, too. This sort of mega-nap can help to make up for some lost sleep and improve your *procedural memory*, the ability to remember how to perform tasks.

It's not easy to find a time or place for a nap in the 9-to-5 lifestyle. Some offices are becoming more siesta-friendly, setting aside a room for catching a few winks or dimming the lights after lunch (hey, it's sleep-friendly *and* eco-friendly!) Sleep salons have also emerged in some cities, offering specially designed chairs or sleep-pods in which customers can relax and receive a massage before they doze off.

Nap tips

Tips for taking a good nap may sound like common sense, but some you may not have thought of:

- **Best nap length:** Keep your nap **short**, roughly 10 minutes or so. Naps for longer than half an hour will make it harder for you to wake up and resume your daily activities.
- **Best position:** Well, of course, a **reclined** position works best. If you're not able to make it to a bed or a couch, it is possible to nap sitting up; it just might take twice as long to fall asleep.

- **Best slumber surroundings:** You want a spot that's **dimly lit, safe, quiet, and just a bit on the warm side** – but not so warm that you slip into a too-deep sleep. Sleep masks offer that bit of darkness you need, as well as gentle pressure to relax tense muscles around the eyes.
- **Best state of mind:** Set a **nap intention**, such as "I will relax into a 10-minute nap." Allow yourself to disconnect your thoughts for a few moments, breathing deeply and steadily. Set an alarm for yourself so you don't snooze beyond your nap goal. Most cell phones have an alarm function.

Sleepwalking

Sleepwalking is fascinating and surprisingly common; about 15% of children aged 5 to 12 years experience at least one episode of sleepwalking. A person will likely not even know that they are a sleepwalker unless they injure themselves during an episode or a family member or roommate alerts them to their nocturnal wanderings.

Sleepwalking typically occurs during deep, *slow-wave* sleep. This is the portion of slumber when dreams are less common. Dreaming doesn't happen during sleepwalking and, in fact, the brain activity is more similar to that of an awake person than of a sleeping person.

Young children tend to sleepwalk more than adults, and tend to outgrow it. Sleepwalking tends to run in families. In children, anxiety or poor sleep habits usually trigger sleepwalking. Similarly, sleep deprivation or too much stress or anxiety can push adults out of bed and into sleepwalking situations.

With their eyes open but their reasoning mind asleep, a sleepwalker may find themselves in dangerous circumstances. While a few sleepwalkers may behave violently during their episodes or do uncharacteristic things, **there's no truth to the myth that waking a sleepwalker will kill them.** They'll simply be startled, disoriented, and have no memory of what they've just experienced. If you encounter a sleepwalker, gently lead them back to bed by the elbow, allowing them to remain asleep if possible.

If you or someone you live with is a nighttime nomad:

- Avoid triggers, like fatigue, stress, or certain substances like alcohol, medications, or drugs.
- Set up safety measures – gates to block stairwells, reinforced locks on doors and windows, buffers on sharp corners or edges. Bunk beds are, of course, a bad idea if a child sleepwalks.
- Talk to your doctor about treatment options should sleepwalking become troublesome or dangerous. In some cases, an underlying medical problem could be to be blame. Prescription medications or hypnosis have been effective for some.

You did what in your sleep?

Sleep seems like such a passive, quiet time. But sleep can actually be filled with activity, some of it amusing, some hazardous. A *parasomnia* is an unusual behaviour during sleep and can range from simply sitting up in bed or mumbling incoherently to making a sandwich or driving a car – all while asleep.

Do you eat in your sleep? If you've noticed tell-tale signs of nighttime eating – no appetite for breakfast, an unexplained mess in the kitchen – you may have a nocturnal sleep-related eating disorder (NS-RED).

Like sleepwalking, sleep eating usually occurs during non-REM, *slow-wave* sleep. And like a sleepwalker, a sleep eater will get up out of a deep sleep and wander, in this case, toward food. While still dozing with eyes open, sleep eaters can prepare, cook, and eat meals or snacks. This obviously poses some risks! Stoves could be left on and knives could be involved. But unintended weight gain and risk for diet-related conditions like type 2 diabetes are other dangers.

Do you talk in your sleep? Sleep-talking, or *somniloquy*, is fairly common. Utterances may come out as isolated statements, grunts, or recurring streams of random gibberish. What is said is often forgotten or

misunderstood by anyone hearing it. The babbling can be heard during any stage of sleep and is more common in children.

The cause of sleep talk is yet unknown, but it may be connected to dreams. Sometimes the chatter may be a symptom of a broader sleep or mental disorder, but most talk is harmless.

Do you scream in your sleep? With a sharp scream or howling bellow, a person in the midst of a *night terror* leaps out from under the covers. The heart races and the eyes are open wide. But the person is still fast asleep. In fact, it can be very difficult to awaken someone having a night terror. Once conscious, they will be disoriented.

Night terrors surface from deep, non-REM sleep, distinguishing them from nightmares, which are dreams that occur during REM sleep. Sometimes a frightening image may appear, like spiders or threatening figures. But unlike someone waking from a frightening nightmare, those who experience night terrors do not awaken during the episode and their memory of it all differs from person to person. Children have more night terrors, though they tend to outgrow them. Night terrors in adults are often associated with a mental disorder, such as bipolar disorder or depression.

Do you act out your dreams as you sleep? Our brains work hard to create a safe setting for dreaming fantastical things. As we sleep our way toward the dream-filled, rapid eye movement (REM) phase of sleep, nerve signals shut down most of our motor functions. This temporary paralysis keeps us from somersaulting out of bed when a dream finds us rolling down a hill. However, people with REM sleep behaviour disorder (RBD) can move their limbs while dreaming, punching, kicking, grabbing, and jumping in their sleep. Unlike night terrors, people with RBD can sometimes recall these vivid dreams when they wake up the following day.

The idea of acting out your dreams may sound like fun, but RBD can be dangerous (especially to their sleeping partner) and signal underlying problems. If you experience symptoms of RBD, talk to your doctor. RBD occurs frequently among people with neurodegenerative disorders like Parkinson's disease.

In isolation, parasomnia activities can be relatively harmless or at least make for a good story. However, any of these sleep events can be disruptive to the overall quality of your sleep and to your health and safety in general. Keep a sleep journal of your nighttime activities. Ask your partner, family member, or roommate to alert you to out of the ordinary sleep behaviours you exhibit. And check with your doctor to help you get back to nights of quiet, peaceful sleep.

Can you get too much sleep?

News reports abound about the weary, drowsy, sleep-deprived masses. Sleep aids can probably be found in the bedside table drawers and medicine cabinets of millions who experience sleepless nights. **But is there such a thing as getting too much sleep – and how much is too much?**

For years, the magic sleep number was 8. Eight hours of sleep per night has long been considered an optimal amount of sleep for an adult. Research has put that old belief to bed, though, revealing that people who get more than 8 hours of sleep report just as many sleep problems as those who get less than 7 hours of sleep. **So the new magic sleep number falls somewhere between 7 and 8 hours.**

Everyone oversleeps from time to time, usually to pay back a *sleep debt* – like after an all-night study session, a bout of jet lag, or any other period of sleep deprivation. Those who sleep beyond 8 hours on a regular basis could be *long sleepers*, the name given to people with *hypersomnia* (the opposite of insomnia, it literally means "too much sleep").

If long sleepers get the sleep their bodies need and their long sleep does not negatively affect their day-to-day life, this is not a serious problem. In some cases, hypersomnia can cause unproductive sleep and changes in mood, memory, appetite, and energy levels.

Check with your doctor if you regularly sleep 10 or more hours and experience daytime sleepiness that is not relieved by napping. There could be underlying reasons for excess sleep:

- use of certain medications
- head trauma
- medical conditions (e.g., multiple sclerosis, epilepsy)
- sleep disorders (narcolepsy, sleep apnea)
- symptoms of other medical conditions (e.g., oversleeping is a common symptom of depression)

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