

# Sleep Facts and Fiction

Considering you spend a good third of your life asleep, you'd think you would know a lot about it, right? Find out how really sleep-savvy you are with this 4-part fact-or-fiction quizzzzzzz...

## Fact or fiction: your pre-bedtime habits

**Fact or fiction: You shouldn't exercise close to bedtime.**

*Fact!*

Regular physical activity supports healthy, sound sleep. But engaging in vigorous activity too near to bedtime may do just the opposite. Exercise invigorates the mind and muscles, gets the heart pumping, and increases your body temperature – all things that work against sleep. A morning fitness routine would be better. Or delay your workout until the late afternoon, since it will give your body temperature just enough time to gradually decrease and ease you into sleep.

**Fact or fiction: Eating before bedtime is recipe for bad sleep.**

*A bit of both!*

When you eat, your body kicks into high gear for digestion, a job best done while not lying down. If you fall asleep with a mega-meal still working its way through your system, you're more likely to be awakened in the night by indigestion. Going to sleep hungry could be just as bad, though. Nibble on a small snack that contains carbohydrates, calcium, and minimal protein, like whole-grain crackers spread with almond butter or topped with low-fat cheese.

**Fact or fiction: Losing sleep can make you fat.**

*Fact!*

Well, lack of sleep may make you feel hungrier than you really are and more likely to reach for fattening, sugary treats. In a research study at the University of Chicago, test subjects who slept 4 hours per night for 2 nights in a row saw a spike in their bodies' levels of *ghrelin*, a hunger-inducing hormone – and a dip in *leptin*, the hormone that tells the brain when it doesn't need any more food. And not only did test subjects feel hungrier, they also craved sweets and shunned healthier fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. The researchers suspect it could be because the sleepy, starving brain seeks some quick glucose from simple carbohydrates. Although the exact link between sleep deprivation and weight gain is still not completely clear, experts agree that getting enough sleep is important to overall health.

## Fact or fiction: getting the sleep you need

**Fact or fiction: You can make up for lost sleep.**

*A bit of both!*

Get less than your usual amount of sleep and you can quickly incur what's called a "sleep debt," which is the difference between the amount of sleep you need and the amount of sleep you actually get. This can cause you to feel drowsy during the day. So, say you usually need a solid 8 hours per night, but for a week you have to stay up an extra 2 hours to study. Sure, you'll turn in your essay on time, but you'll probably feel sleepier than normally, since you've created a "sleep debt" of 14 hours. Eventually, your body requires you to pay off some of that debt. Well, you can "deposit" some of those lost hours later and reduce your sleep debt by taking extra-long slumber sessions, but you may not be able to recover all that lost sleep. If you want to make up for lost time, try going to bed little bit earlier every night and get back to your normal pattern.

**Fact or fiction: You need less sleep as you age.**

*Fiction!*

Though your needs decrease a bit after your childhood and teens, once you're an adult your needs will remain about the same from then on. The perception that older folks sleep less is a bit off. Actually, it's their sleep patterns that shift, not the number of hours spent snoozing. As people get older, they're more likely to fall asleep

earlier in the evening and rise earlier in the morning, with more frequent daytime naps. Sleep may also become more "fragile" with age. That is, it becomes difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep, and there's a decline in the amount of time spent in deeper REM sleep.

**Fact or fiction: Counting sheep can help you sleep.**

*Fiction!*

The idea of imagining trotting sheep leaping over a fence, one after another, helps to lull some people to sleep. The custom supposedly came into practice in the eighteenth century, but modern science – or our shrinking attention spans – seems to have placed doubts on this technique. In a study at Oxford University, a group of 50 insomniacs were told to try to fall asleep while thinking about counting sheep, a relaxing scene, or whatever they wanted. Those who thought of a relaxing scene fell asleep 20 minutes faster than those who envisioned of sheep or other thoughts. Seems leaping sheep just can't hold some folks' interest long enough to put them to sleep. Next time you have difficulty falling asleep, try to put your worries and thoughts aside and instead imagine yourself on a calm beach, drinking cocktails and sunbathing!

**Fact or fiction: Feeling drowsy by mid-afternoon is a sure sign that you need more sleep.**

*Fiction!*

Daytime drowsiness can be one sign of sleep deprivation, but it's totally natural to feel a lull in your energy levels in the afternoon. There's a scientific reason for a siesta! Our bodies run on a biological clock throughout the day, and there are dips and peaks in our asleep-awake cycle. Adults are known to experience the strongest, most persuasive feelings of sleepiness at two times in the day: around 2 to 4 am and then again at 1 to 3 pm (with some variation depending on whether you're a "morning person" or "evening person"). This sleepiness varies in intensity, however, depending on whether we've had enough sleep. If you feel intense drowsiness during early afternoon, that may be a sign that you are sleep deprived. (If you feel it between 2 and 4 am, are you surprised? Go to bed!)

**Fact or fiction: those things that go on in the night**

**Fact or fiction: You shouldn't wake a sleepwalker.**

*Fiction!*

Sleep mythologists once sternly warned to never wake a sleepwalker – and that rousing one could even startle them to death! It's true that it can be quite difficult to wake a sleepwalker, since the behaviour typically happens during deep sleep. And an awakened sleepwalker would be disoriented and likely not remember the incident. But there's no danger in waking them. In fact, you may ultimately protect them from any potential harm they might find if left to amble around the house or out the front door. The best thing to do, though, is to take a sleepwalker by the elbow and carefully lead them back to bed, allowing them to remain asleep if possible.

**Fact or fiction: As long as night-time tooth-grinding doesn't keep you awake, it's no big deal.**

*Fiction!*

*Sleep bruxism* is the grinding and clenching of teeth during sleep. If you're a "bruxer," you might not even know about your gnashing habit, but your bed-mate may hear it and your dentist may see the signs of wear and tear on your teeth. Severe and untreated tooth-grinding can lead to sleep disruptions, damaged teeth, headaches, and pain in the jaw, face, and ears.

**Fact or fiction: That sudden jerking motion you feel as you're dozing off means you're dreaming about falling.**

*Fiction!*

At that early point in your sleep cycle, you're probably not dreaming yet. That unexpected jolt, which can feel like falling off the bed or stepping off of a tall curb, is more likely a *hypnic jerk*, or "sleep start." About 60% to 70% of us experience them occasionally, and they are a very common part of the falling-asleep process. Some sleep experts theorize that these jumps might be a normal part of the transition into sleep or perhaps an evolutionary memory of sleeping in trees. Too much stress, caffeine, anxiety, alcohol, or exercise right before bed may increase the number and intensity of sleep starts. Don't worry about these jolts, unless they're keeping you from getting enough sleep.

## **Fact or fiction: your sleep environment**

### **Fact or fiction: Darkness is the key to sound sleep.**

*A bit of both!*

On the one hand, your body waits for darkness, when the retina of your eye sends a signal to the brain to release the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin. On the other hand, enough exposure to early-morning light can help to regulate your body's internal clock and, in turn, help you to fall asleep more easily. Miss out on morning light by sleeping later and later, and your body's clock will have you falling asleep later and later at night, too.

Essentially, to get good sleep, your body needs the cycle of light and darkness. Keep your clock well timed by getting some direct exposure to sunlight between the hours of about 6 and 8:30 am.

### **Fact or fiction: The glowing LEDs from computers, cell phones, and alarm clocks can keep some people awake at night.**

*Fact!*

Combine low, night-time light and the blue LED lights that shine out from many modern electronic devices and disrupted sleep can result for some people whose eyes are especially sensitive to light on the blue end of the colour spectrum.

### **Fact or fiction: The recommended sleep position is on your back.**

*Fact!*

Sleeping on your back keeps a neutral position. You can also place a pillow under the knees to keep the normal curve of the spine. This position can also prevent acid reflux during the night. However, if you have sleep apnea, which is a sleep disorder involving difficulty breathing, it is better to sleep on your side with legs slightly bent towards your chest. This position helps to support your spine and pelvis. If you have a bad back, you can place a pillow between the legs. Be very careful if you prefer to sleep on your stomach. Sleep specialists do not recommend this position, as it can cause lower back and neck strain and pain.

### **Fact or fiction: Getting warm and cozy is the best way to fall asleep.**

*Fiction!*

A snuggly comforter and soft flannel sheets sure sound snooze-worthy, but your body prefers to fall asleep when it's on the cooler side. A cooler room climate more closely matches the drop in body temperature that happens when we sleep. Temperature preferences will vary from one person to another, but most sleep thermostats like to be set between 15.6 and 19.4 degrees Celsius (60 to 67 degrees Fahrenheit).

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