

# The Impact of Sleep on Your Health

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## **Who doesn't love a comfortable, restful, perfectly timed sleep?**

Good news. Quality sleep – the kind that makes you look refreshed and feeling energized – is exactly what the doctor ordered. In fact, sleep is as important to your health as diet, nutrition and exercise. Regardless of one's age, the right amount and quality of sleep improves attention, behaviour, memory, and overall mental and physical health<sup>1</sup>. Sleep helps the body maintain and regulate many vital functions, the most important of which are restorative. Our bodies take the opportunity sleep provides to repair cells and tissue, grow muscles and synthesize proteins more than at any other time.<sup>2</sup>

So, just how much is best? A 2015 report from the National Sleep Foundation identified that most adults need between seven to nine hours of sleep each night to function at their best during the day, and to keep their body and mind in optimal shape.<sup>3</sup>

For the plethora of benefits when getting just the right amount of sleep, there are as many serious health risks associated with not getting enough. Even reducing that optimal eight hours by two or three per night can dramatically increase the odds of developing some of the following:

- Alzheimer's
- Cardiovascular disease
- Compromised immune function
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Hypertension
- Obesity
- Susceptibility to injury

Issues with sleep can also take a toll on your mental health by influencing behaviours, body sensations, concentration, emotions, and even your thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, over time, a lack of adequate sleep can be associated with a shortened lifespan. Multiple studies have shown that sleeping less than five hours per night may increase mortality risk by up to 15 percent.<sup>2</sup> Still, as our lives are crowded with familial, professional and other activities, many of us overlook the potential consequences, squeezing more and more into our days and nights, leaving quality rest as an afterthought.

## **Your lifestyle and its impact on sleep**

According to a University of British Columbia study, lack of sleep is a growing trend impacting all ages. The link between a lack of adequate sleep and motor vehicle and industrial accidents, as well as, medical and other occupational errors is increasing.<sup>5</sup> Your lifestyle as well as your profession can have a direct impact on your quality of sleep.<sup>1</sup>

Adjusting back to a normal sleeping pattern after the odd sleepless night or trip-induced jet lag can generally be done with some conscious planning; however, for doctors, nurses, pilots, construction and other shift workers, or those who regularly deal with major disruptions to their schedules, it can be significantly more difficult for their natural internal clocks to remain healthy.

Working unpredictable hours that frequently move between days and nights can severely throw off the signals the body uses – like light, or a lack thereof – to regulate when and for how long you need to sleep.<sup>6</sup>

Life choices can also wreak havoc on how well you're able to sleep. Any parent can testify to the enormous impact a new baby; or teething toddler can have on maintaining a normal sleep schedule (or getting any sleep at all!). As children enter school, extra-curricular and family activities increasingly become evening affairs. According to the National Sleep Foundation, for both kids and adults, "scheduled evening activities [are] the most common challenge to getting a good night's sleep" with 41% of parents and 34% of kids having difficulty getting a quality sleep at least one night a week.<sup>7</sup>

Living with someone or sharing sleeping quarters can also profoundly impact sleep. When one partner experiences disturbances or difficulty sleeping, it's not uncommon for the other to have their own sleep impacted as well. A recent North American poll found that 76% of those married or living with someone reported their partner has had at least one occurrence of insomnia within the past year with 33% going partner's sleeping disorders are causing problems in their relationship.<sup>3</sup>

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## **Signs you aren't sleeping well**

How can you tell if you're not getting the sleep you need? Or just as important, if the sleep you are getting is of the quality you need to be your most productive, happy and healthy self? Beyond simply feeling unrested, there are a series of signs that may indicate you aren't sleeping as well as you should. Among the most common are:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness, fatigue or lack of energy that may result in the urge to nap or interfere with daily activities.
- Waking up feeling fatigued or unrested.
- Taking over 30 minutes to fall asleep or difficulty falling asleep in general.
- Frequent waking during the night or trouble staying asleep.
- Waking up too early and not being able to get back to sleep.
- Sleeping too much or too long which may indicate the quality of sleep you're getting isn't optimal.

Another major sign may be the presence of one or more disorders, such as Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS) or unpleasant feelings in the legs or arms, sleep apnea or other breathing disorders, sleepwalking, snoring, teeth grinding

## **How to improve sleep**

Your life may feel busy all the time, and perhaps your current sleeping habits, arrangements and quality are less than ideal, but there's hope! There are many ways to improve your rest, and consciously incorporating even a few of them will likely lead to a more restful and enjoyable sleeping experience.

- Create a relaxing evening ritual. Do things that relax you to create a pre-sleep routine to remove some of your daily stress. Overtime, a routine may act as a signal within your brain that it's time to sleep. Use common favourites like a warm bath or massage or try other calming activities like meditating, breathing exercises or listening to soothing music as you wind down.
- Stick with a routine that includes a predictable sleep schedule. Keep your meals, bedtime and morning alarm consistent, even on weekends. Maintaining your sleep patterns conditions your body to expect and react accordingly to appropriate times of rest and wakefulness.
- Make your bed an oasis. What you sleep on makes a difference. Research shows a new bed [can be] more effective than sleeping pills and improve a night's sleep by up to 42 minutes; this is likely due to the

structure of a bed over 10 years old deteriorating up to 75 percent, which can cause sleep disruption and possible spinal discomfort.<sup>7</sup> Consider picking up a new mattress or bed as you embark on your journey to improved rest. Experiment with different pillows to find the best one for you. Put your mattress on a slatted base for better air circulation and a reduction in uncomfortable sweating.

- Use your bed for sleep... and sleep alone. Keep electronics, food and any other stimulating activities out of your bed. This will cue your brain to sleep – and not prepare itself for eating, reading, TV, video games, studying or chatting on the phone when you lie down.
- Remove electronics from your bedroom. Screens and electronics are an integral part of our daily lives. The activities associated with them, the light they emit, and the stimulus they provide, make televisions, computers, tablets, phones and other digital items a major hindrance to sleep. Try to unplug at least an hour before bed of the bedroom.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, cool, and dark. Removing light, sound and keeping your space at a constant temperature to mimic your ideal sleeping conditions. If needed, consider carpeting to cancel noise, installing light-blocking blinds or use an eye mask to restrict visual distractions.
- Steer clear of caffeine and alcohol. In the hours before bed, especially, but also throughout the day, be mindful of your caffeine intake. While some people can enjoy a morning cup of coffee without repercussions, others may find the effects of caffeine linger well into the evening. Remember that coffee and tea aren't the only caffeine-laden beverages: many soft drinks, chocolate, common medications and herbal remedies also contain caffeine. Read the labels or speak to your pharmacist to ensure you are aware of your daily caffeine intake. Alcohol is known to negatively impact the overall restfulness of sleep and exacerbate breathing issues and restless arms and legs.
- Exercise. A well-known stress-reliever, people who exercise regularly (30-60 minutes, three times weekly) also have better quality, deeper sleep, and are, overall, healthier. Exercise also combats obesity, a major risk factor in lack of sleep, sleep apnea, insomnia and daytime sleepiness.<sup>3</sup> Of course, exercise is a natural energy-booster as well, so be sure to get in that workout at least a few hours before bedtime.
- Cut out napping. While a quick “power nap” may work wonders for some, when there are issues with sleep, it's best to stay awake during the day. This makes it easier for your body and brain to anticipate and respond to a consistent waking and sleep routine. If you absolutely must nap, keep it short - no more than 30 minutes.
- Avoid going to bed on a full – or empty – stomach. Balanced, healthy meals during the day will help keep your body and blood sugars balanced for optimal sleep. Try to keep meals scheduled and don't eat large meals right before bedtime. If you're hungry, have a light, nutritious snack (low-fat dairy or turkey) that won't sit heavily in your stomach or boost your energy. Avoid consumption of high fat foods like chips, ice cream, or fried foods to increase the likelihood of a good quality sleep.
- Get up after 30 minutes if you're unable to sleep. Can't sleep after a half hour? Don't worry. Be gentle and understanding with yourself. Remove the pressure and any anxiety by getting up and resetting things. Leave your room for a while and go back to some of your pre-bedtime relaxation activities or rituals before heading back to bed and trying again.
- Make it a priority...and make the time. A recent North American poll reported taking an average of 23 minutes to fall asleep; if you're of the mind that your own rest needs improvement, chances are you'll need that amount of time, or even more, to actually settle into sleep. So account for that when planning. Committing to getting the sleep you need (and employing the methods you need to get it) may go along with some major changes in how you eat, work and even play, which may prove challenging at first. Stick with it! Remember – those extra few hours will benefit your mind and body across the board.

Sleeping is such an important part of a mindful, healthy, balanced life and most of us could use more of it, and its benefits. So, make a point of implementing some new sleep strategies, jump into those PJs and sweet dreams!

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