

Healthy Sleep

You feel tired and fatigued. The afternoon slump hits; you reach for another cup of coffee, but when it's time for your head to hit the pillow, you jolt awake. Your brain is racing with all the things you must do. The house feels quiet and you finally have a moment to yourself. It may be tempting to stay up late to finish grading a stack of papers, update your lesson plans, or write your paperwork. What's the harm in staying up late?

While one night of shortened sleep may only lead to tiredness or fatigue the next day, sleep debt can easily snowball and have devastating consequences.

One-third of Americans get less than 6 hours of sleep a night – the recommended amount is 7-9 hours for adults.

Why Sleep?

Without sleep the brain struggles to function properly; the neurons become overworked. Your brain becomes less capable of optimal performance and thinking becomes impaired and inhibited.

Effects of lack of sleep

1. Interferes with attention
2. Causes drowsiness and microsleeps (falling asleep for a few seconds)
3. Affects mood
4. Hinders creativity
5. Capacity to learn and improve on the fly, is diminished
6. Impaired decision making – which can lead to riskier choices
7. Slows down thinking /process time - similar to being intoxicated
8. Memory becomes affected:
 - Working memory: recalling things for immediate use
 - Declarative memory: recalling basic facts or statistics
 - Procedural memory: recalling a sequence of steps
9. Difficulty carrying out instructions
10. Difficulty with motor skills, rhythm, speech
11. Hinders cognitive flexibility – the ability to adapt/thrive in uncertain or changing circumstances
12. Exacerbates mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression
13. More likely to make errors
14. Inability to take in new information

Healthier sleep habits

Changing your sleep can be hard. It does not have to be all or nothing. Even small steps to develop better sleep habits or “sleep hygiene” can dramatically impact the quality of your life.

“Sleep Hygiene”

Consistency

Stick to a consistent wake and sleep time every day, even on the weekends. This will help your body naturally fall into a pattern of tiredness and alertness.

Keep a diary

If your sleep is chronically disrupted, track how much sleep you are getting, the quality of the sleep, how you feel before and after, and what your sleep routine is.

Give it time

If you are chronically sleep deprived, you cannot catch up on all the sleep on a weekend or with afternoon naps. Slowly add 10-15 minutes daily to your sleep schedule.

Bedtime Routine

Before going to bed, have a consistent routine to cue your body and mind that it is time to transition to sleep. It could be meditation, reading, journaling, listening to music or any other soothing activity that helps you relax.

Minimize disruptions from light/sound

Artificial lights can disrupt and affect circadian timing. Use dimmer or low-wattage lights to minimize the brightness.

Optimize bedroom temperature

Each person has their own optimal bedroom temperature whether you regulate hot or cold. Generally speaking, it's best to keep it cool and snuggle up with warm blankets.

Disconnect from blue-light technology

Put away devices such as tablets, phones and laptops prior to bedtime.

Limit/moderate caffeine/alcohol

While almost all of us appreciate that cup of joe in the morning, having caffeine too late in the afternoon or evening can keep you up. Find out what works for you and stick to decaf beverages after a certain time of day.

Daily dose of natural light

Exposure to natural light will help synchronize your internal clock.

Physical activity

You do not have to spend hours working out. Even mild-to-moderate exercise such as going for a walk, can improve sleep. Bonus: going for a walk outside also gives you daylight exposure!

Be careful with naps

Naps can interfere with sleep schedules and be counter-intuitive to quality sleep. Keep naps to under 30 minutes and early enough in the afternoon that it doesn't interfere with bedtime.

Talk to your doctor

If you try these tips and tricks and you are still unable to get quality Zzzzs, talk to your doctor. It is helpful to bring your sleep diary to your doctor visit so your doctor can understand your sleep patterns.



tip

Anxious thoughts keeping you up? Keep a notebook by your bed. Write down those thoughts and process them in the morning.