


priority one: sleep

SLEEP IS MORE THAN JUST A LUXURY. IT'S A PILLAR OF HEALTH, EQUALLY—OR EVEN *MORE*—IMPORTANT TO YOUR WELLNESS AS GOOD EATING AND EXERCISE.

BY KAREN ASP | PHOTOS BY JENNIFER OLSON

We're starting to wake up to the importance of sleep. Leaving sleep for whatever time you have left over in the day is not such a smart move, especially if you're hoping to live a long, healthy and productive life. ↔



Logging a good night's sleep might seem more like an indulgence than a necessity, especially in today's society, in which surviving on minimal shut-eye earns you bragging rights. You're simply too busy to do something as mundane (and seemingly unproductive) as sleep. Besides, this mindset comes with rewards, because it implies you're a harder worker. You'll just sleep when you're dead, right?

Turns out, that could be sooner than later if you don't revamp your relationship with your bed. That's because sleep is often considered one of the three pillars of health, along with diet and exercise. More recently, however, it's being seen not just as a pillar but as the foundation. "Sleep affects everything you do in life," says W. David Brown, PhD, CBSM, coauthor of *Sleeping Your Way to the Top* (Sterling, 2016) and a sleep psychologist at Children's Medical Center Research Institute at UT Southwestern in Dallas.

That's a message, however, Americans apparently aren't getting. One in three adults aren't getting the sleep they need, defined as at least seven hours, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has declared America's sleep crisis a national public health issue. Here's how to prevent it from becoming a personal health crisis.

WHY YOU NEED SLEEP

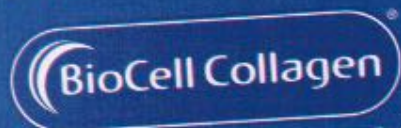
One question that's plagued sleep researchers is the same one you might be asking: Why do humans need to sleep? Many sleep experts will say they don't know, but that's not exactly true. "Although we don't know every single outcome or change that happens in sleep, we do know why we sleep: Because we have to," says Michael Grandner, PhD, director of the Sleep and Health Research Program at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson. Sleep is hardwired into human biology, and aside from being sleepy if you don't sleep, there's a bigger consequence. "We sleep because if we don't, we would die."

That might shock you, until you consider that when you sleep your body's not actually taking a break. Contrary to what most people think, sleep is an extremely productive time for your body, which is why you spend about a third of your life asleep, Brown says.

The human body, after all, is a complex machine with many systems that are trying not only to work together but also to function well on their own, even performing their own maintenance. So how does the body juggle all of these systems and keep them in sync? By following predictable rhythms, namely sleep patterns that mimic the rise and fall of the sun.

The most obvious effect of sleep is how it impacts your cognitive function, including overall brain health. "Researchers suggest that we sleep in order to clear our neural network and keep our brains plastic, so we can open up space for new memories and associations," Brown says. In fact, the effect is so dramatic that sleep deprivation in childhood could change the way kids' brains are hardwired and fundamentally affect them long-term. (As an aside, Brown encourages parents to maintain regular sleep routines for kids and be a good sleep role model so kids learn to take sleep seriously.) ➔

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Without sleep, though, reaction time, productivity, creativity, attention, concentration and memory are quickly impaired. In fact, being awake for 24 hours leads to performance deficits equal to having a blood alcohol content of .10, Brown says. That's why driving, operating machinery or manning an airplane when drowsy can ultimately be deadly.

Chronic sleep deprivation has also been linked with dementia. "Chronically not sleeping well affects how your brain ages," says Britney Blair, PsyD, CBSM, a California-based clinical psychologist and behavioral sleep medicine specialist. Risk of depression and anxiety increases when you're not sleeping, and if you're depressed and have chronic sleep woes, you're six times more likely to attempt suicide.

There are also physical consequences of too little sleep, the biggest being weight woes. "If you're not getting enough sleep and are trying to either maintain or lose weight, good luck," Grandner says. Lack of sleep shifts

two appetite-regulating hormones, ghrelin and leptin, essentially causing you to overeat, among other things.

Other consequences of inadequate sleep include increased risk of diabetes and heart disease, and a compromised immune system, which heightens your risk of getting sick, Blair says, adding that you're three times more likely to get a cold without adequate sleep. And if you're trying to make gains in your fitness program, not only won't you have energy to exercise, you also won't see results if you don't give your muscles time to rebuild and rest, which happens during sleep.

HOW TO LOG THE SLEEP YOU NEED

Organizations have developed numerous sleep hygiene tips to help you slip into sleep and stay asleep. The National Sleep Foundation, for instance, recommends doing things like establishing a regular relaxing routine before bed, setting up a sleep-friendly environment so that the temperature is between 60 and 67 degrees



and the room is dark, avoiding caffeine and alcohol before bed, and getting regular aerobic exercise.

Although these strategies are certainly worth following, they won't work unless you first shift your attitude about sleep. "You need to view sleep as an investment, not an expense," Grandner says. "Just as you have to invest money to make money, you also have to invest in sleep, and though it might take time, it'll pay off in the long run."

That starts by realizing that bragging about sleeping too little is akin to boasting about eating five Big Macs in one sitting. Instead, schedule sleep in your to-do list, and make sure you're aiming for at least seven hours.

"Although everybody has a different sleep need, most people need between seven and nine hours," Blair says.

You should also know that you can't force yourself to go to sleep. For example, if you're running a race or giving an important presentation the next day, telling yourself when you crawl

into bed that you have to sleep will backfire. "Sleep isn't something you do, but rather something that happens to you when the situation permits," Grandner says. "If you try to force yourself to sleep when you're not ready, you'll then be up and drive yourself crazy trying to fall asleep."

Instead, go to bed when you're sleepy—you should fall asleep in fewer than 30 minutes, Brown says—and know that one bad night of sleep won't kill you, even if you have a big event the next day. "It's less about the sleep you got last night and more about the sleep you got in the last week or two," Grandner says. In other words, if you've been maintaining good sleep overall, one or two nights of bad sleep won't hurt you, which is why it helps to bank your sleep a week or two prior to important events.

Another comforting fact? Studies show that people rarely have two bad nights in a row, let alone three, meaning that you will eventually get a good night's sleep, Grandner says. If, however, you're having sleep problems at least

three nights of the week for at least three months, you could have insomnia and should seek help from a sleep specialist.

You should also know that waking up several times during the night is normal. Good sleepers actually awaken five to eleven times, but because sleep has an amnesic property, you won't remember most of them, Brown says. Unless, that is, you break a cardinal sin and see a clock face or a turned-on TV. "If your eye catches something of interest, you'll wake up and won't be able to fall right back to sleep," he says. Worse, any worries you have will seem more terrible at night, namely because of the way your brain is hardwired, making you think less rationally and more emotionally. Give yourself permission to let go until the morning, when you'll be able to rethink it.

But what if you wake up and can't fall asleep? Get out of bed (it should only be used for sleep and sex anyway) and do something that makes you sleepy like reading or listening to soothing music, Grandner says. As soon as ➔



SLEEP MYTHS: BUSTED

Our experts debunk three common sleep myths:


1. You can make up for lost sleep. This one's tricky, as it's both true and false. "Trying to catch up with sleep if you're deprived one night is a good idea," says California-based sleep specialist, Britney Blair. For instance, if you slept poorly the night before, adding a little more sleep the next night is good. Yet if you've constantly deprived yourself of sleep during the week, adding those lost hours to the weekend doesn't work and could spell trouble. "You'll wake up Monday morning feeling as if you had jet lag," she says, adding that it's worse if you have insomnia. A recent survey by the meditation app Calm, in fact, found that 46 percent of participants named Sunday as the night when they found it hardest to sleep, perhaps because they changed their sleep routine over the weekend.

2. You can survive on fewer than six hours of sleep a night. Numerous executives tout how little sleep they get, but in reality, few people—less than 1 percent of the population—are short sleepers, meaning that they need fewer than six hours a night, says sleep psychologist W. David Brown.

3. Naps are for babies. Although naps don't necessarily make up for lost sleep, they can help if you need a quick pick-me-up, Brown says. They're especially effective when circadian rhythms naturally dip, between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. for most people. Limit napping to no more than 30 minutes; even just five to ten minutes can help. The one caveat? If you have insomnia, napping isn't recommended.

your eyelids get heavy, return to bed.

Just don't rely on sleep medications, whether over-the-counter or prescription. Although they can help you sleep, especially in cases where you're facing a short-term stressor, they're not designed for long-term use; you can become dependent on them and so tolerant that you have to keep taking more, Blair says. Instead, two to four days is about the maximum you should use them. Meanwhile, some supplements, including melatonin, could improve sleep naturally. Turn to page 47 to learn more about the research-backed sleep supplement ingredients that have had calming effects for some people.

Society's views on sleep are starting to shift toward scientific realities, and you can be part of the change by making sleep a priority. Sleep when you die? Not anymore. You'd rather sleep to live. 

SHOULD YOU USE A SLEEP TRACKER?

Tracking devices have never been hotter. Not only do they measure activity level, step count and heart rate, but many also track sleep, which begs the obvious question: Do they work?

Although they may raise your sleep awareness, and even alert you to a problem, they may also have the opposite effect, making you stressed about the data, according to a study published in *Sleep Medicine*. "A select few became very focused on getting to a specific number of hours of sleep," says Kelly Baron, PhD, MPH, lead study author and clinical psychologist at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. "It's great to have a goal, but if your whole day depends on whether you hit that number or not, that's going to make it challenging."

Self-monitoring is indeed the cornerstone of behavior change, but remember that sleep trackers are only an estimation of sleep, Baron says. Most trackers tend to overestimate sleep and aren't good at discriminating light sleep from quiet wakefulness (like lying in bed and reading). Bottom line? Use it if you think it's helping, but if the data is making you anxious about sleep, put that tracker to bed.



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