

How to Sleep Well

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There are four recognised pillars of health: nutrition, exercise, sleep and relaxation.

But rather than just being a pillar of health, **sleep may be the very foundation of good health** which lends stability to the other three: without proper sleep you often resort to bad food choices, opting for high sugar and carbohydrate contents in a bid to raise flagging energy levels, you might not feel much like exercising if you're too tired, and instead of doing something relaxing like reading a book, you find yourself taking a nap...



Across the animal world, we can see that it is a fundamental part of life for all mammals: some animals sleep a whopping 22 hours in a 24 hour period (koala bears) and on average, humans sleep between 7 and 9 hours each night, which means spending around 32 years of our lives asleep!

So why have we evolved to do something that leaves us vulnerable and, on the surface, is not very productive at all?

Although it seems like we're doing nothing, in fact certain areas of the brain actually increase their activity during sleep rather than shutting down...

Why do we sleep?

There are of course the obvious benefits of sleep like rest, but it's also a time for:

- The restoration and repair of our organ systems such as the muscles, the immune system and our hormones.
- Sleep affects us on a cellular level. At the end of each of our chromosomes are tiny hair-like filaments called telomeres which protect the genetic information (think of them like the plastic stoppers at the end of your laces, they stop the laces from unravelling – telomeres do the same job for your chromosomes). The shorter the telomeres, the shorter your life span, it's effectively your aging process – and sleep disorders have been found to be linked to shorter telomeres.
- It's a time when our memory consolidation happens: think of your brain having millions of neural pathways, there's lots of traffic going through them during the day as you take on board new experiences, interactions, learning, etc. At night, as you sleep the traffic dies down, making it a great time for your brain to process the information, to determine what needs to be stored away and what should stay available
- It's a time for 'housekeeping', when toxins that have built up during the day are removed – especially toxic clusters of beta-amyloid protein which collect in the brain cells and are implicated in the onset of Alzheimer's Disease)
- It's also a time when the important neural connections (synapses) are strengthened, and the less important ones are broken down, this ensures your brain continues to function effectively

Serious disasters have been attributed to sleep deprivation:

- Chernobyl nuclear power plant (1986) - the engineers involved had been working for 13 hours or more
- Challenger Space Shuttle disaster (1986) - certain managers involved in the launch had only slept two hours before arriving back at work at 1am that morning
- Exxon Valdez Oil Spill (1989) – the third mate was allegedly asleep at the helm, causing it to run aground, spilling 258,000 barrels of crude oil and destroying wildlife

These are of course rare exceptions but when we don't get enough sleep our bodies can start to take over. Chronic lack of sleep can have consequences like micro-sleeping – these are short, unintended periods of loss of attention, lasting a fraction of a second up to 2 minutes.

They manifest in a blank stare, head snapping, prolonged eye closure which may occur when you're trying to stay awake especially when performing a monotonous task like driving a car or staring at a computer screen.

And we've all gone through periods of a lack of sleep, whether it's because we're going through the new stages of parenthood (remember those 1, 2, 3 hourly wake ups for feeding? Or when your child is sick and needs to be comforted), or perhaps you've gone through life changes that have interfered with your sleep patterns: starting businesses, new jobs, getting married, moving house, or perhaps it's been work or personal pressures...

So how do you make sure you get a good night's sleep?

You might recognise the importance of a good bedtime routine for children - that bath, quiet play, a bedtime story, lights low or turned off, a cuddle before creeping out?

The reason we do that for our children is that their brains love routine. And in fact, all our brains love routine, they love knowing what is coming next because it makes them feel safe and secure and when we feel that, we can allow ourselves to be as vulnerable as sleep make us.

It also prepares the brain, it's doing the same thing consistently, so the brains know that the next phase is to drift off into sleep...

Prioritising your sleep is a key element to getting better quality sleep.

Some key tips to get you sleeping well:

1. Sort out your bedroom:
 - Make your bedroom a 'boredom' zone, remove TV's/ipads etc and de-clutter by removing laundry, papers, etc.
 - Keep bedroom dark (use eye masks if necessary), turn off rather than 'stand by' to minimise light, and cool at 16°C – 18°C
 - Make your bedroom a haven for relaxation with artwork, pleasing bed linen, check your pillows and mattress (renew every 8-10 years)
 - Be aware that smells in the bedroom affect your mood – Lavender Essential oil can be sparingly dropped onto pillow

2. Get old-fashioned:

- Use an old fashioned alarm clock, not your phone – just by having your phone by your bedside, whether it's turned off, in flight mode or on silent, keeps your brain engaged. Invariably it will be the last thing you look at before you go to sleep and the first thing you look at when you wake up. You create a habit of being drawn in to check it, rather than using it when you want to.
- Your brain is always seeking the next best thing that's going to stimulate it and social media is very, very good at doing that and keeping you hooked, searching for the next post, the next video, increasing your FOMO (fear of missing out) – so leave it outside the bedroom.

3. Go to sleep in a happy state:

Your brain does most of its processing during sleep, if you can program it to focus on good things, happy experiences, positive emotions, your brain naturally seeks out more – conversely if you go to bed on the evening news (usually bad, filling you with negative images and thoughts) or after sending work emails or browsing through social media (where everyone seems to be doing better than you – even though they're not!), that's what your brain will work on and what it will seek out.

- Think of 3 good things that makes you feel happy, or you can even practise gratitude techniques (Gratitude Diary), meditation, reflection or positive forecasts, self-hypnosis
- If you can't help ruminating on work or things going on in your life, you can use breathing techniques, body scanning, counting (backwards), or relaxation audios – these all distract the brain away from the negative stuff into something more soothing

When we feel well-rested, we feel full of energy and ready to face the day. Sleep plays an essential part of our overall health and wellbeing for both body and mind – making it a priority and everything else will fall into place.

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