

8 Ways to Sleep Better by Kimberly Wendt

It's hard to overstate the importance of sleep to good health and well-being.

Think about times you've been sleep deprived, whether it was cramming for a test in college, or after a newborn entered your life or you suffered with some insomnia. You probably felt tired, sad and emotionally sensitive.

May is Better Sleep Month, a time to remember that getting enough quality sleep improves your mental health, physical health, quality of life and safety. Sleep also allows your brain to prepare for the next day and helps you learn and remember new information. It also helps heal and repair your heart and blood vessels.

People who don't get enough sleep are less productive, take longer to finish tasks and have a slower reaction time, which can impact your safety during driving or in your line of work. Certainly, you wouldn't want a tired surgeon to operate on you. Or a tired pilot to be flying your plane.

How much sleep is enough?

It varies depending on age. Infants and children should get 12 to 16 hours of sleep a day, including naps. Teenagers need eight to 10 hours to function at their best. And adults should get seven to nine hours.

When you sleep is important, too. Not sleeping when you feel ready can make you feel as bad as missing several hours of sleep. If you're a night shift worker, or if your sleep is routinely interrupted, you should pay special attention to your sleep need.

Improve your sleep habits

When you're busy, sleep may be your first sacrifice. You might go to bed a little later and get up a little earlier to make some "extra" time, but it's not extra time. You're depriving yourself of much-needed sleep. A recent study on the myths surrounding sleep found that believing those myths can actually hinder you getting quality sleep.

Here are some good, research-based habits to help you get the best sleep:

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- Keep the same sleep schedule on weeknights and weekends.
- Use the hour before bed as quiet time – avoid strenuous exercise and bright artificial light, such as from a computer screen or TV.
- Avoid heavy or large meals within an hour of bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine, alcohol and caffeine, especially late in the day.
- Spend time outside every day and be physically active.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, cool and dark.
- Use relaxation techniques before bed – a hot bath, meditating, mindfulness practices.

When to talk to your doctor

If you're not just suffering with sleep deprivation or deficiency, you may have a sleep disorder. Some signs that you may be dealing with a sleep disorder are:

- If you sleep a lot but still don't feel rested, you should talk to your doctor because there may be underlying health issues.
- If you often feel sleepy during the day without cause
- If you're having trouble adapting to shift work

If you're dealing with these issues, speak to your doctor.

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Wishing you joy and good health,
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