

## S L E E P   W E L L

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**M**any people don't think about the importance of sleep—until they can't sleep. Time set aside for sleep is often what's left over after work, school, errands, meals, chores, the kids, the dog. It can be easy to fall behind and cut back on the time devoted to slumber. But getting the proper rest is essential to our health and effective daily functioning. Medical experts don't completely understand why we need the sleep we do, but everyone understands that it's essential to clear thinking, optimal performance and maintaining disease resistance.

People deprived of regular, good-quality sleep often report difficulty with short-term memory, reduced attention span and changes in mental outlook similar to depression or anxiety. They also describe significant affects on their quality of life, including low energy, decreased libido, irritability and poor mood. Research has shown that loss of sleep can adversely impact immune function and our body's ability to fight viral infections.

Excessive sleepiness is also a leading cause of car and truck accidents in the United States. Additionally, many catastrophes—accidents at the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl nuclear power plants and the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster—have been associated with lapses in judgment by sleep-deprived workers.

How do you evaluate the sleep you're getting? Start by considering the quality and quantity of your sleep. One simple way to determine sleep quality is to consider how you feel upon waking. Are you refreshed and ready to take on the day? Or do you feel groggy and eager to crawl back under the covers? Good-quality sleep should leave you feeling alert and able to manage your daily activities without much effort, even if your day's activities are dull or mundane.

Like sleep quality, the appropriate sleep quantity varies with the individual, though the accepted standard for adults is about eight hours of sleep each night. To de-



termine how much rest you need, note the amount of sleep you get on a weekend night when you don't have anything scheduled the next morning. If you can determine how much sleep you need when you awaken spontaneously, then you'll know how much time to set aside for sleep.

Many people experience an occasional sleepless night, but nearly 10 percent of adults report insomnia interrupts their sleep routinely. Insomnia is a symptom rather than a health concern in itself, so when patients come to see me with recurring sleep problems, first I want to rule out any serious health issue as the cause. Insomnia can be an early indicator of cardiovascular issues, as well as respiratory or gastrointestinal concerns, or even depression. After a thorough examination to rule out any serious health problems, I talk with my patients about developing healthy sleep habits. These habits are often referred to as good sleep hygiene and include the following recommendations:

**Establish a bedtime routine.**

If you maintain a habit of slowing down and preparing for sleep, your body will eventually respond and it will become easier to fall asleep.

**Practice relaxation techniques.** Try to resolve the issues of the day and set them aside for sleep. This is a habit much easier said than done, but one suggestion people find helpful is to write a to-do list for the following day. Knowing your priority list for the next day may allow you to relax and put yourself—and your concerns of the day—to bed.

**Don't force sleep.** Sleep when you feel tired and try to sleep only as much as it takes you to feel rested.

**Avoid stimulating activity**

**before bed.** Refrain from vigorous exercise close to bedtime as well as action-oriented television shows and video games in favor of quiet activities, such as reading or listening to soothing music.

**Don't eat before bed,** especially if you have any problems with acid reflux.

**Avoid caffeinated drinks after lunch.** Many people underestimate the lasting power of caffeine.

**Avoid alcohol at least two to three hours before bed.** Some people believe a “nightcap” will relax them and put them to sleep. While the effects of alcohol might initially make you sleepy, the work your body does to process the alcohol can later disrupt your sleep.

**Avoid smoking,** especially in the evening.

**Establish a routine of regular exercise.** A regimen of brisk walking four times per week enables you to expend energy and helps you sleep.

**Adjust your bedroom environment.** Try to reduce excess light, noise, heat or other distractions. Keep your bedroom temperature comfortable, between 55 and 75 degrees.

People's lives are busier and more scheduled than ever, so it's important to make adequate sleep a priority to ensure that you and your family are getting the proper rest. Sleep is essential to our good health and well-being, allowing us to function at the top of our game, as well as helping us avoid accidents and potentially life-threatening situations. If you experience recurring trouble with sleep, talk with your primary-care doctor to make sure it's not an indication of a more serious health problem. Because we dedicate nearly one-third of our lives to sleep, we should make sure that it's time well spent.

**HELPFUL WEB SITES**

[www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)  
[www.sleepcouncil.com](http://www.sleepcouncil.com)