Taking the Tired out of Life

Quality deep sleep is linked to longer life, improved energy, mood, mental function, and performance. It is also linked to lower risk for obesity, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer, and many stress-related disorders. Implementing new lifestyle approaches to achieve better sleep takes patience and perseverance. It may take several weeks or even months for you to achieve consistency in sleep habits, but the reward will be sounder, sweeter sleep and better overall health. Remember to work with your health care provider to rule out serious medical conditions or sleep disorders.

The following seven tips will help you claim one of the best prizes for a hard day’s work—a good night’s sleep.

1. Avoid stimulants

Caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco disrupt quality sleep and should be avoided. Caffeine blocks an important brain chemical, adenosine, which is triggered when your brain has had enough activity and needs to shut down and rejuvenate, forcing your brain into overdrive. Nicotine not only disrupts deep sleep but also reduces total sleep time, resulting in more daytime drowsiness in smokers. Alcohol will put you to sleep faster, but also causes disruption of deep sleep. Calming herb teas like chamomile or Sleepy Time will satisfy the urge for a drink without robbing you of needed sleep. Remember, the best energy does not come from stimulants, but from a good night’s rest.

Extras:

Lack of sleep leads to falls

A new study shows that women over age 70 who get five hours of sleep or less on a regular basis are 47% more likely to fall than those women who get seven to eight hours of sleep. Talk to your doctor if you have trouble getting enough sleep—there are several treatment options, including medication and environmental changes, such as darkening the room, eliminating noise, etc. RBL Nov. 2008

Sleep duration linked to weight gain

A recent study confirms research linking how long a person sleeps at night with risk of weight gain. The study published in the April 1, 2008, issue of the journal Sleep, found weight gain happens with both too much and too little sleep.

In the study, those who averaged five to six hours of sleep at night gained 4.4 pounds more than did average-length sleepers who got the typically recommended seven to eight hours at night. Among those who slept from nine to 10 hours, the weight gain was 3.5 pounds above that of average-length sleepers.

The study design doesn’t provide any clear answers on why weight gain differs with sleep duration. However, researchers speculate that one plausible explanation for the differences may be a disruption in the production of hormones that control appetite. Of specific interest are the hormones leptin, which diminishes appetite, and ghrelin, which stimulates appetite.

Sleep Capacity May Decline with Age

Can’t sleep? Instead of insomnia, you may simply have less capacity to sleep. A small sleep-lab study of healthy adults suggests that older people take longer to fall asleep and spend less time asleep, on average, adding up to an overall reduction of 90 minutes a night. The study compared the sleep habits of 18 people ages 65 to 72 with those of 35 people ages 18 to 32.

Recognizing that the maximum capacity for sleep changes even during healthy aging may lead to a different view of sleep complaints associated with aging, the study concluded. “If older people believe that they need more sleep than they can achieve, even when they spend extra time in bed, then they may complain of insomnia,” explained co-researcher Elizabeth Kierman, MD, of Harvard University. “They may start using medications needlessly. If they are tired during the day, they should consider evaluation for a sleep disorder that may be interfering with their ability to obtain good sleep at night.” Current Biology, Aug. 5, 2008

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2. Nix late-night eating
Eating big late-night meals may make you feel groggy, but they cannot deliver when it comes to quality sleep.

Heartburn and frequent trips to the bathroom are only part of the problem. Eating late tends to reset the body’s internal clock, confusing natural wake/sleep patterns. It also causes surges of stress hormones and insulin, which make blood sugar and stress hormone control more difficult the next day.

The last meal of the day should be light and at least four hours before bedtime. High-fiber foods at mealtime, such as whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, beans, and nuts, will help control appetite and reduce late-night hunger. Finally, be sure to enjoy plenty of fresh water between meals to keep your brain perky and body well hydrated.

3. Exercise
Regular physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, can help you fall asleep quickly and sleep more soundly. It reduces stress, improves mood and mental processing, and eases tension and stress-induced fatigue.

Exercise in the sunshine is especially beneficial. Sun exposure triggers the production of melatonin, a hormone important to sleep. Melatonin production tends to be lower in people who are shift workers, those who have prolonged exposure to artificial light, and in the elderly. Eating plenty of complex carbohydrates helps boost brain serotonin, also necessary for melatonin production.

4. Keep on the sunny side
Ever tried sleeping in a train station with a suitcase for a pillow? Going to bed with emotional baggage makes for just as bad a night. Rehearsing hurts, frustrations, and disappointments can take a your mind on a mental train ride to trouble— including insomnia—that will take you far from that restful sleep that you need to recover from the day’s challenges.

Remember: A clear conscience makes a soft pillow. Make wrongs as right as possible before you go to bed. Keep the positive aspects of people and the potential for growth that exists in every challenge front and center in your mind. Keeping your mind on a positive track just may be your ticket to a good night’s sleep!

5. Manage your media.
Hatchet movies and horror shows do not make for sweet, sound sleep. In fact, one British study showed that just 14 minutes of negative news significantly increased depression-boosting stress hormones and catastrophic thinking in study participants. Negative media, or intense email, phone, and internet activity, especially in the evening, signals the brain that an emergency is pending and it’s time for the brain to wake up—not calm down.

6. Establish a routine
Routine is the route to sleep. It helps to have a special wind down period about an hour before bedtime. Decrease mental and physical activity in the evening. This cues the body that sleep is coming and helps you mentally relax and prepare for rest. Sleep cues can include a warm bath, enjoying a favorite inspirational book or calming music, dimming the lights, making a few preparations for the next day, visiting with your spouse, or enjoying a relaxing light activity or hobby.

These wind down tips work well with children also; avoid letting children stay up so late that you are robbed of your quiet time and they are overtired and running on nerves. Make sure that your room is dark and cool, and that you do not eat or watch TV in bed.

7. Stick to a schedule.
Irregular hours for eating and sleeping sap brain and body strength. The body has circadian pacemakers which influence hormones, metabolism, body temperature, and sleep/wake cycles. These pacemakers are influenced by meal timing, sun exposure, exercise, and regularity.

As a rule, try to eat your meals at the same time every day. Establish a regular schedule for exercise, work, social time, and relaxation. Your body and brain work better on a schedule, and this makes sleep just one part of your larger, systematic health routine.

Footnote: 1. Diabetics need to work with their health care provider. Used with permission of LifestyleMatters. If you want more information, contact them at 1-866-624-5433 or www.lifestylematters.com