



Sleep

Sleep, and getting enough of it, is understandably important to overall health. Achieving restful sleep allows the body to rejuvenate and has beneficial impacts on physical and mental health.

Sleep is not just a block of time when you are not awake. Thanks to sleep studies done over the past several decades, it is known that sleep has distinctive stages that cycle throughout the night. Your brain stays active throughout sleep, but different things happen during each stage. For example, certain stages are needed to help you feel rested and energetic the next day, and other stages increase your cognitive abilities, enhance your ability to learn new information, and improve memory.

A number of vital tasks carried out during sleep help maintain good health and enable people to function at their best. On the other hand, not getting enough sleep can be dangerous for both your mental and physical health.

In our current society, there seems to be a prevalence of sleep deprivation, and many choose to brag about it. It is common to hearing comments of long hours at work, family obligations, and a routine of hitting the gym at 5:30 AM. Many boast about giving up sleep to “maximize life”, get ahead, and prove competence... but at what cost? In day to day activities, a good night’s sleep means we are attentive, patient and energetic. We feel like ourselves!

How Much Sleep Is Enough?

Sleep needs vary from person to person, and they change throughout one’s lifecycle. Most adults, including older adults, need 7–8 hours of sleep each night. Children have different sleep needs, depending on their age.

Why Sleep Is Good and Skimping Is Not

Not only does the quantity of your sleep matter, but the quality is important as well. How well rested you are and how well you function the next day depend on your total sleep time and how much of the various stages of sleep you get each night.

Performance

We need to sleep to think clearly, react quickly, and create memories. In fact, the pathways in the brain that help us learn and remember are very active when we sleep.

Skimping on sleep has a price. Cutting back by even 1 hour can make it tough to focus the next day and slow your response time. Studies have shown that when you lack sleep, you are more likely to make bad decisions and take more risks. This can result in poor performance on the job or at school and a greater risk for an accident or car crash (some Canadian studies suggest that 15 to 25% of all car collisions involving bodily injury or fatality are attributed to driver fatigue).

Mood

Sleep also affects mood. Insufficient sleep can make you irritable and is linked to poor behaviour and trouble with relationships, especially among children and teens. People who chronically lack sleep are also more likely to become depressed.

Health

Sleep also is important for good health. Studies show that not getting enough sleep or getting poor quality sleep on a regular basis increases the risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and other medical conditions. In addition, during sleep, your body produces valuable hormones. These hormones help children grow and help adults and children build muscle mass, fight infections, and repair cells. Hormones released during sleep also affect how the body uses energy. The less people sleep, the more likely they are to be overweight or obese, develop diabetes, and prefer eating foods high in calories and carbohydrates. Getting enough sleep boosts the immune system and our ability to fight disease and endure sickness.

Of course, there are several sleep conditions that cause some to suffer. The most common are sleep apnea (interrupted breathing during sleep), periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD) and insomnia. There are more than 100 different sleeping and waking disorders. They can be grouped into four main categories:

- Problems falling and staying asleep (insomnia)
- Problems staying awake (excessive daytime sleepiness)
- Problems sticking to a regular sleep schedule (sleep rhythm problem)
- Unusual behaviors during sleep (sleep-disruptive behaviors)

If you suspect any of these conditions, you should consult a medical doctor for advice. Many treatment options are available.

Sleep hygiene

Whether you suffer from a sleep condition or just fight with bouts of sleep deprivation when stress or tension are on the rise, sleep hygiene can assist you in attaining restful sleep. The concept of sleep hygiene is to follow some logical steps that can contribute to rejuvenating sleep.

Sleep hygiene tips:

- Stick to a sleep schedule—Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- Avoid caffeine and nicotine.
- Don't exercise too late in the day.
- Avoid alcoholic drinks before bed.
- Avoid large meals and beverages late at night.
- Avoid naps.
- Relax before bed—for example, take a hot bath.
- Create a good sleeping environment. Get rid of distractions such as noises, bright lights, an uncomfortable bed, or a TV or computer in the bedroom.
- Daily physical exercise (such as walking briskly for 30 to 40 minutes) has beneficial effects on sleep.

Like many health related issues, good lifestyle habits result in better sleep!

Remember

With their solution focussed approach, your employee assistance program (EAP) professionals can assist you in dealing with issues, set your mind at ease, so that you can get a good night's sleep.

**For a confidential consultation, call your Employee Assistance Program at
1-800-268-7708 or for the hearing impaired at 1-800-567-5803 24-hours a day.
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/eas**