



Not Getting A Good Night's Sleep? You're Not Alone

Want to decrease your risk of diabetes, stroke, heart disease and even catching a cold? Want to improve your sex life and your ability to be creative and problem solve? Try getting a good night's sleep.

In the past, sleep was viewed mostly as a way for the body to recharge itself and prepare for a new day. But research has shown that sleep is much more important than that. A lot of physical healing and rejuvenation happen only when you're asleep. Sleep:

- Is involved in the process of healing and repair of blood vessels
- Helps maintain a healthy balance of the hormones that make you feel hungry or full
- Affects how your body reacts to insulin – the hormone that controls your blood sugar
- Is critical to the proper functioning of your immune system
- May help you benefit more from vaccines

Lack of high-quality sleep is now understood to be critically important to our physical and mental health. But getting enough sleep can be a challenge. If you have trouble sleeping, take some comfort in knowing that you have plenty of company and read on.

Sleep Disorders

Our hectic, high-stress, internet connected device filled lives can make it difficult to get enough sleep. About 30% of Americans report chronic sleep difficulties, and four out of five people say they suffer from sleep problems at least once a week and wake up feeling exhausted.

The three most common conditions that disturb sleep:

- Insomnia – This catch-all usually describes a symptom rather than a disease. Insomnia can be temporary and situational, resulting, for example, from stress, medicines, diet or life changes. It can also be chronic, resulting from medical conditions.
- Restless Leg Syndrome – This disorder, which causes a strong urge to move your legs, especially when you're inactive, can seriously interfere with sleep. While RLS tends to run in families, it has been associated with diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson's and iron deficiency.
- Sleep apnea - Sleep apnea is a common disorder characterized by one or more pauses in breathing or shallow breaths while you sleep. Breathing pauses can last from a few seconds to

minutes. They may occur 30 times or more an hour. Typically, normal breathing then starts again, sometimes with a loud snort or choking sound. Sleep apnea usually is a chronic condition. Many people with sleep apnea don't realize that they have the condition – it is often recognized by a family member or partner.

How Much Sleep Do You Need?

The truth is, we all need different amounts of sleep. If you always feel tired, you probably need more sleep. But . . . the magic number for adults seems to be seven. People who sleep seven hours a night are generally healthier and live longer. Sleeping less than seven hours a night has been associated with higher risks of obesity, heart disease and impaired immune function.

While the National Sleep Foundation does have rough guidelines (displayed at right), they don't tell you much about what *you* need. Individuals' sleep needs are controlled mostly by genetics and lifestyle. It's as easy as observing yourself. If you feel tired during the day and regularly take naps to make it through to the evening, then you probably aren't getting enough sleep. If you are getting 7 or 8 hours of sleep every night and still feel tired during the day, you may need to schedule an appointment with Dr. Pierce or Dr. Afrookteh to try to see if there is an underlying issue.

If your schedule allows it, you can also do your own mini sleep study. Choose a regular time to go to bed every night and leave your alarm clock off so that you wake up when your body is ready. Over the course of a couple of weeks, you'll see a pattern emerge that shows you how much sleep your body needs.

LIFE STAGE	DAILY SLEEP NEEDS
NEWBORNS (0-3 MONTHS)	14-17 hours
INFANTS (4-11 MONTHS)	12-15 hours
TODDLERS (1-2 YEARS)	11-14 hours
PRESCHOOLERS (3-5 YEARS)	10-13 hours
SCHOOL AGE (6-13 YEARS)	9-11 hours
TEENAGERS (14-17 YEARS)	8-10 hours
YOUNGER ADULTS (18-25)	7-9 hours
ADULTS (26-64)	7-9 hours
OLDER ADULTS (65+)	7-8 hours

These guidelines from the National Sleep Foundation are just a starting point.

Can't Sleep? What to Do About It

There are plenty of things you can try to improve your sleep quality. But first things first – you need to decide whether anything you try is addressing the underlying problem or just treating the symptoms. It's generally not a good long-term strategy to take medications that help you sleep unless you are also addressing the things that are causing you not to sleep in the first place. So while dietary supplements or

medications may help you get on the right track, they are generally not recommended as permanent solutions to sleeping problems.

There are lots of tricks and tips in the pages listed in the *Resources* section below. Here are just a few:

- **Lifestyle Changes**

A low-risk, high-health way to address insomnia is to try incorporating healthy sleep habits into your lifestyle. This includes:

- Following a regular sleep schedule - Doing the same thing before bed each night can help prepare your body for rest and condition your brain for sleep. Stick to activities that promote relaxation such as gentle stretching, journaling, reading or meditation.
- Limiting caffeine and alcohol – Any caffeine you drink within eight hours of going to bed can affect your sleep quality. And while alcohol may help you fall asleep, once its effects wear off, it makes you more likely to wake up in the night.
- Exercise more – Studies have shown that aerobic exercise (exercise that gets your heart pumping) can help to improve sleep quality.
- Manage stress - While stress isn't all bad, when it turns into worry or anxiety it can disrupt your sleep. If your busy mind is keeping you up at night, try practicing stress management techniques before you go to bed.

- **Changing the Lights**

It's well known that light can interfere with the internal clock that tells our body when to sleep. The main culprit – light in the blue spectrum – exactly the color of light that's emitted from the smartphone, tablet or television you watch just before you go to bed. Some companies are now selling “smart lights” that can adjust the spectrum from blue in the early evening (when you want to be alert) to more sleep-friendly colors later at night. It may not be a cure-all, but it may be worth trying. You can [read more about it here](#) on the New York Times Wellness Blog from February 10, 2017.

- **Melatonin**

Lots of people take over-the-counter Melatonin to help with sleep issues. It's not a cure-all; Melatonin is thought to work best for sleep disorders that result from a misalignment between your biological clock and the night-day pattern in your environment. This is common with, for example, jet lag. *Melatonin is generally recommended as a short-term remedy only.*

Melatonin is generally thought to be benign, but it can react negatively with a lot of different medications, including blood thinners, diabetes medications and immunosuppressants (medications that suppress the immune system). As with any dietary supplement, it is best to check with Dr. Pierce or Dr. Afrookteh if you're planning to try Melatonin supplements.

- **Antihistamines**

Antihistamines are found in a lot of over-the-counter sleep aids and in some allergy medications and cold remedies. They work against histamines, a naturally-occurring chemical in our nervous systems. While antihistamines can be effective for two or three nights to address a specific issue, *they are not suitable for long-term use.* In fact, most people develop a tolerance to them

over time and they eventually stop working. In case that's not enough to dissuade you, they're also not recommended for people with glaucoma, asthma, COPD or liver disease. And excessive use can have significant side effects in older adults, including risk of dementia, blurred vision, constipation and rapid heart rate.

This article is not meant to be a substitute for sound medical advice. If you think you may have a sleep disorder, or even if you're just tired all the time, please visit Dr. Pierce or Dr. Afrookteh and have a conversation about it.

Resources

The good news is that there are lots and lots of resources to help people recognize and address sleep problems. Here are just a few:

[Mayo Clinic](#) – Scroll down the page to the Sleep section and read eight posts about sleep (the source of much of the information in this article).

[National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute](#) – An in-depth review of sleep, including why it's important, signs and symptoms of sleep disorders, coping strategies and clinical trials.

[HHS Guide to Healthy Sleep](#) (download) – A free downloadable 60-page book from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute

[How to get a Better Night's Sleep](#) – A special feature in the New York Times online with lots of information about sleep, including tips and tricks for improving sleep quality.