Your Guide to Sleep and Wakefulness

Highlights

1. Most adults need about seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Getting enough good-quality sleep is important for your overall health and quality of life.
2. Some people have sleep disorders, such as insomnia, sleep apnea, circadian rhythm disorders, or parasomnias.
3. If you’re struggling to get enough sleep or feel rested, talk to your doctor. They may prescribe treatments for underlying health conditions or recommend changes to your sleep habits.

Sleep is essential

Sleep is an important part of your overall health and quality of life. How well you sleep affects how well you feel when you’re awake. Both the length and quality of your sleep are important. Most people spend nearly a third of their lives sleeping, which is necessary for good productivity and health.

Too little or too much sleep can cause health problems and lower your quality of life. Furthermore, some chronic diseases that cause altered sleep patterns may get worse from lack of sleep and result in a shortened life expectancy.

What are the benefits of sleep?

When you’re asleep, your body replenishes and repairs itself. It needs this time to repair muscles, consolidate memories, and release hormones that maintain growth and digestion. Good-quality sleep helps control your appetite, support your immune system, and promote good overall health.

Many adults are chronically sleep-deprived from going to bed too late or waking up too early. Getting too little high-quality sleep can leave you feeling fatigued, unable to concentrate, and mentally foggy. It can also raise your risk of accidental injury and certain health conditions.

The amount of sleep you need depends on your age. Children and teens generally need more sleep than adults. For most adults, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute recommends getting seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Getting too little or too much (typically defined as more than 10 hours per night on most nights) can be problematic.

Stages of sleep

Your sleep cycle can be broken into two main types of sleep: nonrapid eye movement (NREM) and rapid
eye movement (REM) stages.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, NREM stages should typically make up 75 percent of your sleep time. There are four NREM stages:

- **Stage 1** occurs when you've just gone to bed. You're in transition between wakefulness and sleep.
- **Stage 2** occurs when you fall asleep and become unaware of your surroundings. Your body temperature drops and your breathing and heart rate fall into a natural rhythm.
- **Stages 3 and 4** occur during what is called “deep sleep,” when your breathing slows, blood pressure decreases, and muscles become completely relaxed. During these restorative stages of sleep, blood flow to your muscles increases, growth hormones are released, and tissues can repair themselves.

REM stages typically take up the other 25 percent of your sleep time. A REM stage typically occurs about 90 minutes after you fall asleep — and approximately every 90 minutes after that. During these stages of sleep, your eyes move around, your brain is active, and your body is relaxed. This is when dreams occur. This type of sleep energizes your body and brain and helps you feel alert and focused during the day.

**Sleep disorders**

Some people have sleep disorders that make it difficult to get good-quality sleep. Sleep disorders include insomnia, sleep apnea, circadian rhythm disorders, and parasomnias.

**Insomnia**

Insomnia is a common condition. It's characterized by difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep.

You may experience insomnia for several reasons. Common reasons include stress, anxiety, inconsistent sleep schedules, and overall poor “sleep hygiene” (discussed below). Moreover, insomnia may also be an underlying component of depression or generalized anxiety, which often requires treatment.

**Sleep apnea**

Obstructive sleep apnea, often referred to as sleep apnea, occurs when your airways briefly collapse, which interrupts (or obstructs) your breathing. This can potentially happen multiple times a night. It can wake you up suddenly and cause stress, resulting in poor sleep, although some people are not aware that they are waking up during the night. Symptoms may include fatigue, headaches, and snoring. Sleep apnea can cause long-term health problems.

**Circadian rhythm disorders**

Circadian rhythm disorders occur when your sleep schedule becomes irregular. The most common type of circadian rhythm sleep disorder is called “shift work disorder.” People who work during the night are at risk of this condition. It occurs when you feel tired at night while you're working, but you have difficulty sleeping during the day when you're not working. Jet lag can also disrupt your sleep rhythms.
Parasomnias

Parasomnias include sleepwalking, talking during sleep, grinding your teeth during sleep, nightmares, and wetting the bed. These behaviors can influence the stages of your sleep and result in poor quality rest.

Tips for sleeping well

Sleeping well is necessary for good health. But for many people, it’s hard to do. Try these simple strategies to enjoy better quality sleep.

Get treatment for sleep disorders

If you suspect you have insomnia, sleep apnea, or another sleep disorder, talk to your doctor. Many sleep disorders can be managed through lifestyle changes or other treatments.

For example, your doctor may advise you to change your sleep environment or habits, practice meditation or other relaxation strategies, or take prescription medications. They may also suggest you undergo a sleep study, known as a polysomnogram, to further evaluate the cause of your sleep disturbance.

Practice healthy sleep hygiene

Healthy sleep habits can help you fall asleep, stay asleep, or enjoy better quality sleep.

For example, a consistent sleep schedule is important. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same times each day, even on weekends and holidays.

Making your bedroom more sleep-appropriate and comfortable can also help. Take steps to keep it dark, cool, and quiet. Consider limiting indoor sources of light, buying dark curtains, and using earplugs. Update your mattress, pillows, and bedding as needed. Limit use of screens (TV, phone, tablet, or computer) 30 minutes before sleep.

Developing a presleep routine can also help prepare your body and mind for sleep. This routine should include relaxing activities, such as taking a warm bath, drinking herbal tea, reading a calming book, listening to calming music, writing in a journal, practicing restorative yoga, or meditating. Avoid loud noises, bright lights, glowing computer screens, and other stimulating things before bedtime.

Since stress often causes sleep deprivation, efforts to reduce stress are also important. For example, consider simplifying your lifestyle, setting priorities, delegating tasks, and taking regular breaks. Prioritize self-care by eating a well-balanced diet, getting regular exercise, and making time for activities you enjoy.

It may also help to:

- Avoid caffeine, especially late in the day.
- Avoid alcohol, which can disrupt sleep stages.
- Don’t drink too much fluid at night to lessen your need for bathroom trips.
- Avoid exercise late in the day.
- Avoid daytime naps or limit them to 30 minutes or less.

If these lifestyle changes don't help you get the sleep you need, talk to your doctor. You may have an
underlying health condition that's keeping you awake at night. Your doctor can recommend next steps and strategies to improve your sleep.