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Getting Enough Good Sleep


 By [Trish Henry](#), editor, Internal Thrive | November 11, 2011

There are amazing benefits for those who get enough sleep including improved heart health, memory, happiness and more. Can't fall asleep? Find tips on sleeping.

There was a time I could stay up all night studying (or having fun!), attend classes during the day and evening, and then work part-time around my school schedule with no ill effects. In fact, getting two or three or five hours of sleep a night every night was fun and invigorating!

Unfortunately for me, that day is long past. However, I still tend toward being a night owl just to have enough quiet time to do the things I want to do. The problem is, there are only so many hours in a day and as the years pass, I find myself choosing to spend more and more of those hours on personal projects and less on sleep. Big mistake.

With a sleep-deprivation schedule like that, I sometimes feel a bit tired and groggy, grumpy and hungry, unfocused and not able to think at the level I'm used to. And it's no wonder. Take a quick look at the HHS [National Institutes of Health's Guide to Healthy Sleep](#) (pdf) and you'll see what I mean. There are consequences to cutting down on sleep and amazing benefits for those who follow their body's needs in getting enough good sleep.

How much is enough?

Although the amount each of us need can vary from person to person and change a bit as we age, both quantity and quality of sleep are important. How much do we need? Studies show that we need 7–8 hours of sleep a night for adults and at least 10 hours for school-aged children and adolescents. Some adults may even need 9 hours a night or more.



And it's not just enough to put in the hours. The sleep has to be high quality. Which means that we must experience [all the stages](#) of sleep including drowsy sleep, deep sleep, and REM sleep. Without these stages of sleep, it's likely we'll wake up feeling exhausted and wanting to go right back to sleep.

Sleep, what's it good for?

- **Avoid getting sick.** A well-rested body naturally fights infections better and is less likely to succumb to infections in the first place. If you do find yourself sleeping more in the short term, it could be a sign that your body is fighting an infection.
- **Remember more, have a longer attention span, and be smarter.** Getting enough sleep allows your brain to function better; so when presented with new tasks after enough sleep, you are better able to pay attention and understand what you are learning. If, after you learn something new, you are able to get a good night's sleep, you will retain what you learned the previous day at a higher rate. Lack of sleep can lead to faulty decision making and more risk taking as well as a slower reaction time.
- **Be happier.** People who don't get enough sleep are often irritable and in a bad mood. Chronic lack of sleep can lead to depression.
- **Lose or maintain weight!** When you sleep, your body naturally produces an appetite suppressor, and when you're awake, your body produces an appetite stimulant. When you're tired, eating can help fight sleepiness, so it's easy to eat to gain energy to keep going. Unfortunately, the types of food we are more likely to choose at those times are not healthy choices like apples, but rather high-calorie snacks like chips or cookies.
- **Better heart health.** Sleep is good for heart health and lowers your blood pressure. When we sleep deeply, our heart rate and blood pressure lowers and rises over the course of our sleep. Studies have shown that this phenomena leads to better overall heart health. Lack of sleep stresses your body and can lead to heart disease and increased risk of stroke.

Sleep myths

A common myth is that as we age, we need a lot less sleep. This is not true. What really happens is that older adults may be getting poor-quality sleep due to ill health, sleep-blocking medications, or other sleep disorders. So while it may *feel* like they are getting by on less, the fact is that other factors are getting in the way of getting

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enough sleep, or enough good sleep. To be at our best, all adults need 7–8 hours of good sleep a night.

Another common misconception is that we can make up for what sleep we missed during the week by sleeping extra on the weekends. The problem is that if you've lost too much sleep, or have too much of a "sleep debt," sleeping in on a weekend does not completely erase your sleep debt. It can take several days to recover from even one day of insufficient sleep, and the longer you go, the longer it takes to make it up.

Can't fall asleep? Here are some tips

- **Avoid caffeine and other stimulants like nicotine.** It can take as long as 6–8 hours for the effects of caffeine to wear off completely, so if you want to go to sleep at 10 p.m., cut your caffeine off at 2 p.m. Alcohol can prevent deep sleep and REM sleep, which can lead to poor-quality sleep that will leave you tired in the morning.
- **Avoid large meals or vigorous exercise just before bedtime;** both can make it harder to fall asleep.
- **Remove distractions from your bedroom.** Do NOT have your cell phone at your bed side. Make your room dark, calm, and quiet.
- **Do use your bed for sleeping** — not as an office. If you do, your body will know that when you climb into bed it's supposed to sleep there, not stay awake thinking.
- **Build in "winding down" time into your getting ready for bed schedule.** Try to think of calm, relaxing things; meditate, turn off loud energetic music, and switch to something calm and soothing. Taking a hot bath is not only relaxing, but afterwards, the body's temperature drops in a way that mimics sleep.
- **Stick to a sleep schedule.** If your body gets used to going to bed, falling asleep, and waking up at the same time each day, it will be far easier to relax into sleep.
- **If you still can't sleep after 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing** until you begin to feel sleepy.



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