



5 Reasons to Sleep Your Way to Better Health

By Suzy Buglewicz

When your mother told you to get your beauty sleep, she may have been on to something. From babies to adults, studies show that the amount of sleep a person gets can directly affect his or her diet and overall health. While individual sleep needs vary, most adults need about 7 to 9 hours of sleep a night consistently, while school-aged children need 9 to 12 hours. According to the National Sleep Foundation, about one third of adults regularly get 6 hours or less of sleep a night. How do you know if *you're* getting enough sleep?

A good way to tell is if you feel alert during the day and feel satisfied with the amount of sleep you are getting. And there are myriad reasons to make sure that happens. Here are five reasons to get enough sleep.

1. Reduces the risk of depression. Getting enough sleep is essential for functioning both mentally and physically during the day. Not getting enough can lead to dramatic mood swings, which can increase the risk of depression. Do you have a moody teenager in the house? Pediatricians recommend that teenagers get from 8 to 10 hours of sleep a night. While pulling an occasional all-nighter is not likely to make much of a long-term difference in our health, research shows that consistent sleep deprivation—getting less than 6 hours of sleep on a regular basis—can have lasting effects that can't be reversed. These effects can include high blood pressure, negative moods, and a decrease in productivity. Good sleep habits lead to better moods at work as well as better moods in our social interactions and personal relationships.
2. Helps maintain an optimal weight. In a culture that encourages us to work and play 24/7 and fuel fatigue with caffeine to keep going, it's easy to see why so many of us are frequently tired. But did you know that getting too little sleep can cause weight gain? Studies have shown that sleep deprivation can lower proteins in the body that suppress our appetites, causing people to want to eat more than they would if they had gotten enough sleep. And when we're tired from lack of sleep, we tend to overeat to refuel our bodies—to replace the energy we've lost. Unfortunately, we're more likely to reach for our favorite comfort foods or foods that give us a quick burst of energy, and those foods tend to be high in calories and carbohydrates. People who don't get enough sleep might also feel too tired to keep up a regular exercise routine, making it harder for them to maintain a healthy weight.
3. Increases the ability to think clearly. A lack of sleep not only makes us drowsy and unable to concentrate, it can also lead to impaired memory function and job performance. When we're well rested, we're likely to be more alert, physically stronger, and better able to perform well at our jobs and at creative problem solving. A lack of sleep in school kids can lead to poor concentration and behavior problems in school. Sleep deprivation has also been shown to decrease hand-eye coordination and reaction times, especially when driving. When we do get enough sleep, we're able to think clearly and react to situations quickly.
4. Reduces stress. It's no coincidence that as a society we've cut back on sleep over the past few decades by 1 to 2 hours a night, while studies show that more of us are reporting higher levels of stress than in past years. According to the National Sleep Foundation, 35 percent of adults report that they don't get enough sleep, with women feeling the effects of sleep deprivation more than men. Unfortunately, many adults accept their lack of sleep as a way of life and turn to caffeine to combat the fatigue

they feel during the day. Aiming for at least 7 hours of sleep a night—along with exercise and a balanced diet—will minimize stress.

5. It's good for the heart. When it comes to getting a good night's sleep, there are significant health benefits for people of all ages.

Research has shown that consistently skimping on sleep can weaken our immune systems, making us more vulnerable to sickness and disease. Several studies have shown that a lack of sleep, or getting less than 6 hours of sleep a night regularly, can lead to an irregular heart rate as well as higher blood pressure and increased cholesterol levels, which are both risk factors for heart disease. So the next time you try to short yourself on a good night's sleep, think about all the health benefits you're missing by staying awake for that extra hour or two.

Strategies for a Better Night's Sleep

- Maintain a regular bedtime and wake-up schedule
- Establish a regular bedtime routine that includes such things as reading or taking a bath
 - Sleep on a comfortable pillow and mattress
- Avoid activities like paying bills or working (even exercise, for some people) right before bedtime
 - Maintain a regular exercise schedule