

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SLEEP

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In last month's article, stress was identified as something that could negatively impact one's overall health and well-being. Sleep was also identified as being intricately related in helping overcome symptoms of stress. When we are tired from a lack of quality sleep, the rigors of everyday life feel like they are 100 times more challenging and stressful than they really should be! The purpose of this article is to further elaborate on the significance of

sleep, and to provide useful tips and advice on how restful sleep can be incorporated into your lifestyle.

The average adult requires seven to eight hours of restful sleep each night. This is a time when the body recharges, recovers, and recuperates. In our busy lifestyles today, we ironically shortchange ourselves on the amount of sleep we get. As little as three days of sleep deprivation has been shown to significantly compromise productivity, create problems in relationships, and contribute to other health problems. There are numerous important biological mechanisms that are regulated in our bodies during times of sleep. Without restful sleep, these crucial biological mechanisms become disrupted, and can contribute to health problems. Chronic insomnia can often be a symptom of a serious underlying medical disorder, with up to 50% of cases attributed to depression, anxiety, stress, and grief. Insomnia can also result from ailments ranging from arthritis, asthma, and breathing problems, to hyperthyroidism, kidney or heart disease. Clinically, insomnia is always a difficult condition to confront. Below are some suggestions on how you can improve your chances of getting a restful and productive night's sleep.

Individuals should avoid large meals before bedtime, or any meals high in sugar. This elevates blood sugar, which inhibits sleep, and can also cause gastrointestinal upset, gas, and bloating. Avoidance of alcohol and caffeine is also recommended so that the body can reach the deeper stages of sleep. Smoking is a stimulant to the nervous system, and can also cause sleeplessness.

Sleeping in complete darkness is important. When light hits the eyes, it disrupts the circadian rhythm of the pineal gland, which produces melatonin and serotonin. These two substances are produced by the body during sleep and are important for several essential biological mechanisms in the body. It may be helpful for individuals to remove a television from the bedroom for two reasons. One is because of the excess light hitting our eyes as mentioned previously. The other reason is that watching television in the bedroom right before sleep may be stimulating to the brain, taking longer for us to fall asleep. Your bed should be kept for sleeping. If you are used to watching TV or doing work in bed, you may find it harder to relax and to think of the bed as a place to sleep.

The end of the day should be viewed as a time to wind down from a busy and hectic day. Try doing something you enjoy and find relaxing. Some people find certain sounds such as nature sounds or white noise comforting and relaxing. Reading something spiritual or religious can also be helpful for relaxation. For others, taking a

hot bath, shower or sauna before bed can be very soothing. Make sure you are comfortable for bed. Studies have shown that keeping your feet warm by wearing socks reduced night wakings, and it is generally recommended that bedroom temperature be kept between 20-22 degrees Celsius.

Healthy habits can contribute to a good nights sleep. Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day, even on weekends helps your body get into a sleep rhythm and makes it easier to fall asleep and get up in the morning. Getting to bed early can be quite helpful to your adrenal glands, which do the majority of their recharging and recovering between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. Scientists have implicated adrenal stress as a significant contributor to insomnia. Regular exercise of at least 30 minutes everyday, and losing weight have also been shown to be beneficial in achieving restful sleep.

For those looking for an edge in gaining restful sleep through natural supplementation, here are a few suggestions. Calcium and Magnesium have been shown to have a calming effect on the body and may help with sleep. B vitamins have been shown to relieve stress and promote a restful state. California poppy, hops, passionflower, skullcap, and valerian root are all herbs that have been demonstrated to help overcome insomnia. For those taking prescription medications, discuss with your doctor whether the drug you are taking could be affecting your sleep.

Restful sleep is essential for good health. Whether it is constant pain from a condition or illness, a chronic life stressor, or just poor lifestyle choices, sleep deprivation is a potentially serious health concern that should be addressed immediately.

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