How to Get a Good Night's Sleep

Everyone has a rough night now and then. But not getting enough sleep can cause accidents behind the wheel or on the job. Plus, over time, poor sleep can hurt your health. The good news is that you can learn new habits to improve your sleep.

HOW SLEEP HELPS YOUR BODY

It may seem odd, but the mind and body are quite active during sleep. In fact, certain stages of sleep allow us to learn and remember. Sleep is also a time to fight infection and help prevent heart problems and diabetes. If you are managing a health condition, sleep can help your body and mind stay strong.

Experts are also breaking down how our sleep needs impact us. The National Sleep Foundation points to basal sleep need and sleep debt as two key factors:

- Basal sleep need is the amount of sleep needed to function daily.
- Sleep debt is mounting sleep loss thanks to bad sleep habits, illness, sleep disruptions and more.

For instance, you may have gotten 8 hours of sleep last night. But if you had many nights of poor sleep last week, you may still have a lot of "sleep debt." This debt can make you tired. To feel fully rested, both basal sleep needs and sleep debt have to be considered.

TOP HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS

To start, you should do your best to set aside enough time to sleep. Most adults need about 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. There are other things you can do:

- Keep a sleep schedule. Go to bed and rise at the same time each day, even if it's not a work day.
- Exercise early. Make sure you exercise at least 2 to 3 hours before bedtime. You want your body to relax well before going to sleep.
- Skip caffeine and nicotine. The caffeine in coffee and other drinks and chocolate can take up to 8 hours to wear off. Nicotine also stimulates the body.
- Avoid alcohol before bed. A drink may help you feel sleepy, but it causes light sleep. Plus, drinking alcohol before bed can make you wake up in the middle of the night.
- Limit food and drinks late at night. Large meals can cause indigestion that gets in the way of sleep. Too many fluids can cause more trips to the restroom.
- Avoid certain medicines. If you can, avoid medicines that delay or disrupt sleep. Some heart, blood pressure, asthma and cold medicines can harm sleep. Talk to your doctor about your options.
- Nap smartly. Don't nap after 3 p.m. If you need rest, try to nap earlier in the day and limit it to an hour or less. Long, late naps can make it harder to fall asleep at night.
- Relax before bedtime. Try listening to music or reading, or taking a bath.
- Get proper sun. Make sure you get outside for at least 30 minutes of natural sunlight each day.
- Do something if you can't fall sleep. If you can't sleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed and do something relaxing until you feel tired again.

YOUR SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

Making changes to your bedroom can help improve sleep. Replace your mattress if it is uncomfortable. Try to keep the room cool, which can help you sleep better. It will also help to get rid of things in your bedroom that can disrupt sleep. For instance, bright lights and sounds from TV or computers can get in the way of sleep. Make sure that you also use your room for only sleep and sex. Do not watch TV or work in bed.

GET HELP

Sometimes, you can have good sleep habits and still struggle. A sleep disorder may be to blame. See your family doctor if you have ongoing sleep troubles or feel tired during the day. Put getting good sleep at the top of your list—your body and mind will thank you!