



get
Quality
Sleep this
year

Not the stuff of dreams, you can
improve your sleep quality

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We need and crave sleep, while at the same time wishing we could make do with less. Yet when sleep eludes us, we complain incessantly and cannot thrive. Since we can't live without it, it's wise to learn how to maximize our sleeping hours.

Sleep is when your brain slips involuntarily into a different state of consciousness. Stages 1 and 2 are light sleep, and stage 3 is characterized by a deeper sleep that will leave you feeling disoriented if you are roused. Stage 4, with rapid eye movement (REM), is the deepest phase and full of dreams. Together, these stages form a complete 90-minute sleep cycle, which is necessary in order to awaken feeling well-rested. A solid night of sleep generally consists of five or six full cycles.

In the 12th century, Rambam asserted that adults need an 8-hour span of sleep per day. Nowadays, the National Sleep Foundation recommends the same. Although there's some room for individual variation, 7-9 hours of sleep is still viewed as the optimal daily amount for adults until age 65, when our sleep requirement drops slightly.

Sadly though, many people moan that sleep doesn't come easy. A 2009 survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control revealed that almost 40% of the American population report getting fewer than seven hours of sleep per night, putting the nation in sleep debt.

DANGERS OF SLEEP DEBT

Without enough zzz's, sleep deprivation and a slew of accompanying health problems can ensue.

Dr. Rina Granot, Psychotherapist and Naturopath, founded and runs the Yad L'Briut Health Center where she trains women as health coaches, in addition to treating patients in her private clinic and online. For our on-the-go generation, Granot warns about the health risks of not granting your body enough dozing down-time.

"Sleep debt raises our risks for heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, and it weakens our immune system," says Granot. "Growing evidence also indicates that it causes weight gain. This is likely due to the fact that sleep deprivation increases body levels of ghrelin, a hunger hormone and appetite stimulant, while leptin, the satiety hormone, is decreased."

"Also, when you don't spend enough time in REM sleep, memory and cognitive abilities suffer," Granot adds. "Your brain doesn't have a chance to process emotions and retain thoughts."

BLAST STRESS FOR BETTER SLEEP

An informal survey around your neighborhood will

probably reveal that most people blame stress for blocking sleep. Many scientific studies agree that mental stress is a common culprit.

In order to counter anxiety, Granot suggests the following stress-buster that can be done in a pinch, anywhere and anytime:

- **Standing in place, tense and contract as many muscles as possible.**
- **Hold your breath and this position for a count of five.**
- **Release air slowly through your nose while relaxing each muscle group.**
- **Repeat 3-5 times to help lower cortisol levels and calm your whole body.**

SLEEP HYGIENE

While stress is responsible for a great deal of tossing and turning, it's not the only cause. When sleeplessness creeps up on us, it's time to assess our sleep hygiene. This refers to an array of lifestyle habits and routines, all within our control.

SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

CLIMATE CONTROL: Bedrooms should be cool; the ideal temperature is 60-65 F (16-18 C).

SHUT THE LIGHTS: Even light from street lamps or a hallway can disrupt sleep. Wear a sleep mask, or invest in heavy curtains. The glow of a cell phone screen, computer monitor or any back-lit displays is also bothersome.

LOWER THE VOLUME: If you live on a noisy street, purchase a white noise CD or machine. Ear plugs and double-glazed windows also help.

SUPPORTIVE COMFORT: Your mattress should cushion your joints and support your back firmly. Memory foam and orthopedic pillows are also helpful.

BEDROOM DÉCOR: Avoid bright, stimulating color schemes. Muted and neutral tones are most calming.

SLEEP SCHEDULE

While you've outgrown story time, easing into bedtime with a soothing routine is still important. Our bodies need to unwind before sleep. Take a bath, read an enjoyable book or practice relaxation exercises.

Sticking to a basically consistent bedtime is important for setting your body clock. As painful as this may sound, a regular wake-up time – even on weekends and vacation – also helps maintain good sleep quality.

IS NAPTIME A NO-NO?

Daytime naps may cause nighttime sleep cycles to remain light without extending into deeper stage 3 sleep. Yet for some people, such as moms of babies and

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young children who wake at odd hours, naps are a crucial survival tactic.

“While 20-minute power naps will help, a full 90-minute nap is ideal, since it provides a full, restorative sleep cycle,” Granot states. “Sleep when your kids sleep; it’s the only way to prevent complete sleep deprivation.”

SUPPLEMENTS

Did you know that melatonin is the only hormone available in the U.S. without a prescription?

Levels of melatonin, produced by the pineal gland, rise with nightfall and signal the body to fall asleep. When dealing with short-term disturbances such as jet lag, melatonin supplements can be taken 1-2 hours before bedtime. However, melatonin pills are not advised for long-term use as they may suppress your natural ability to produce this important hormone.

Magnesium enters our cells and helps relax the body. Granot praises the benefits of taking magnesium supplements each morning, such as Green Magma, available in either a powder or pill form and with kosher certification. Made from barley grass sprouts, Green Magma boasts a broad range of healthful vitamins and minerals.

“Valerian pills are also beneficial for sleep, which can be taken up to two hours before bed - if you can tolerate the pungent taste and smell!” adds Granot.

FOOD-SLEEP CONNECTION

“People who make nutritious food choices may need less sleep than those who fill up regularly on fried schnitzels and chips,” says Granot. “When your biological energy doesn’t need to be so invested in the digestive system, the body needs less time in recuperative sleep.”

FOODS TO AVOID

Anything caffeinated, such as coffee, energy drinks, soda, and yes - chocolate too, should be avoided from the late afternoon.

Refrain from drinking alcohol at least two hours before sleep, for while it may help you nod off, it generally causes one to waken within an hour or so.

Evening meals and snacks shouldn’t be heavy or too spicy; these may cause indigestion.

Foods that get a green light are the ones that increase serotonin levels. Serotonin carries calming messages between your brain cells and other body cells. While you can’t simply pop a serotonin capsule, certain foods promote its production.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, lean proteins and unsaturated heart-healthy fats effectively raise serotonin levels. In contrast, trans fats and saturated fats

actually decrease levels. Surprisingly, cherry juice has also been found to encourage melatonin production. A 2010 study published in the Journal of Medicinal Food found that drinking 30 ml of sour cherry juice twice a day led to increased melatonin in the body.

With all of this in mind, some good suggestions for pre-sleep snacking include:

- Granola with pumpkin seeds, with milk or yogurt. Enhance flavor with 2 TBSP of sour cherry juice.
- Sliced turkey or chicken, on whole grain bread or crackers
- Whole grain crackers with a smear of peanut butter

GET MOVING AND FALL ASLEEP

In a study conducted at Northwestern University’s Feinberg School of Medicine, different groups of women with sleep complaints were placed in various exercise routines. While the positive results were not immediate, after 16 weeks, all of the exercisers reported significant improvements in sleep duration and quality, versus the sedentary control group.

Tai Chi in particular seems to work wonders on improving sleep quality. A 2008 study published in the journal Sleep concluded that Tai Chi should be considered seriously as a useful non-pharmacological approach to improve sleep quality.

WHEN TO SEEK TREATMENT

Many of these tips on sleep hygiene and other lifestyle changes are simple to implement, while others demand more effort. Yet for a majority of sleep complaints, following these guidelines pays off with more restful nights.

However, not all sleep complaints are so smoothly solved. When problems are more extreme, a serious sleep disorder such as restless legs syndrome, apnea or narcolepsy may be present. A medical physician or sleep specialist should then be consulted for diagnosis. **fyi**

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