



Mind, body and sleep

Looking for the ultimate performance enhancer? Try switching off and sleeping on it, says Domini Stuart.

Thomas Edison, John F. Kennedy, Salvador Dali, Margaret Thatcher...look up 'famous sleeping habits' on the Internet and you'll find long lists of people who claimed to need no more than four hours sleep a night. You won't find a similar list of long sleepers. Perhaps that's because most of us feel that surviving on very little sleep sounds more dynamic and entrepreneurial than snoozing away a third of your life or more.

The reality is that most of us pay a high price for cheating on sleep. Lack of sleep makes us slower to respond, more likely to have a road accident and less effective at work – and, according to new evidence, it can seriously damage your health.

When scientists at the University of Chicago prevented a group of healthy young men from sleeping more than four hours a night they were startled by the results. After just six consecutive days, the volunteers' blood insulin had dropped to pre-diabetic levels. Tests also detected high levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which can lead to hypertension, memory impairment, mood swings and even weight gain. Cortisol can also suppress the immune system, making us more susceptible to disease.

High achievers used to tell us 'I'll sleep when I'm dead'. It seems they could be dead if they don't sleep!

Making sleep a priority

"We're definitely pulling back from the bravado...from the idea that people who need more than a few hours sleep are lazy or unmotivated," says Dr Peter Cotton, Clinical Psychologist and member of the Australian Psychological Society. "Yes, there are enormous individual differences in the need for sleep and, yes, there are people who only need 3 or 4 hours a night, but most of us need 7, 8 or even 9 hours if we're going to function at our best."

Dr Paula Mitchell, a psychologist specialising in sleep disorders and body clock disturbances, agrees that sleep needs to be a priority.

“Sleep really is just as important as nutrition and physical fitness,” she says. “It’s unfortunate that, nowadays, people are finding it harder to go to bed. It wasn’t so long ago that there was nothing to do after 11 o’clock at night. Now we have 24 hour TV, email, the internet...there’s a big temptation to put sleep to the bottom of the pile.”

But what if you *can’t* sleep? First thing to know - you’re not alone. No less than 30% of Australian adults and teenagers complain of insomnia.

“Recently I was asked to present a corporate workshop for a large Melbourne law firm,” says Mitchell. “They run monthly health and wellbeing sessions, and these usually attract 20-25 people. I had 180 takers. Interestingly, that was almost exactly a third of the people who work there.”

Emptying the mind

So how can we get a good night’s sleep?

“When you have your own business there’s always a lot to think about,” says Mitchell. “Some people find their minds are so active they have trouble falling asleep. Others work until they drop, falling asleep easily but waking in the early hours with their head buzzing.

“Often, the first quiet time they have all day is when they’re in bed,” she continues. “It’s not surprising their thoughts are churning.”

Mitchell recommends getting all of your worrying out of the way *before* you go to bed. “Set aside a specific time each evening to do your thinking and planning for the following day. It’s like emptying the garbage bin – you won’t have any worrying left to keep you awake!”

An evening ritual

Sometimes losing sleep is unavoidable. When Samantha Pritchard gave birth to Kai he weighed 11 pounds – and was exceptionally hungry! For the first few months she needed to feed him every two hours, day and night.

“That’s when I came to realise how incredibly important sleep is in our lives,” she says. “It really can make or break your day.”

Kai was just 18 months old when Pritchard launched ‘Turtle House’. She had identified a need for more modern and better-designed vending machines for women’s personal care items and was keen to get her own business off the ground. Luckily, by this time, she and husband Peter had turned sleeping into an art form.

“Peter also has his own business – Bloomfield Advertising – so we always have a million thoughts racing through our heads,” Pritchard says. “We make a point of jotting down everything we need to do the following day, so it’s out of the way. Then our nightly ritual is a warm bath and, for me, a foot rub with lavender foot cream. That scent alone can put me to sleep!”

“Clearing the mind, practical relaxation and a ritual winding down can all help you fall asleep, and stay asleep,” says Cotton. “And that means, next day, you’ll have more energy for leisure, sport and family as well as your work.”

5 ways to a good night’s sleep

- **Watch your caffeine intake.** It may not stop you from falling asleep but it can increase night waking and reduce the quality of your sleep. Remember you’ll find caffeine in tea and soft drinks as well as coffee.
- **Drink alcohol in moderation.** Alcohol is a relaxant, so a glass or two of wine with dinner might help you to get to sleep. More than that and you’re likely to suffer a rebound effect in the early morning when it’s out of your system.
- **Avoid too much stimulation.** Reading is good for winding down as long as you don’t choose a forensic thriller. Action movies and brain-pounding music are also best avoided at bedtime.
- **Find a relaxation technique that feels right for you and persevere.** Relaxation is a skill you can learn.
- **Stick to a routine.** Stay out on Friday and Saturday nights, sleep in on Saturday and Sunday mornings and, by Monday, your body clock will already have started to drift. Try not to lie in for more than an hour, even at the weekend.