Good Sleep for Good Health: Get the Rest You Need

Sometimes, the pace of modern life barely gives you time to stop and rest. It can make getting a good night's sleep on a regular basis seem like a dream.

However, sleep is as important for good health as diet and exercise. Good sleep improves your brain performance, mood, and health. Not getting enough quality sleep regularly raises the risk of many diseases and disorders. These range from heart disease and stroke to obesity and dementia.

There's more to good sleep than just the hours spent in bed, says Dr. Marishka Brown, a sleep expert at the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). "Healthy sleep encompasses three major things," she explains. "One is how much sleep you get. Another is sleep quality—that you get uninterrupted and refreshing sleep. The last is a consistent sleep schedule."

People who work the night shift or irregular schedules may find getting quality sleep extra challenging. Times of great stress—like the COVID-19 pandemic—can disrupt normal sleep routines. However, there are many things you can do to improve your sleep.

Sleep for Repair

Why do people need to sleep? People often think that sleep is just "down time," when a tired brain gets to rest, says Dr. Maiken Nedergaard, who studies sleep at the University of Rochester. "But that's wrong," she says. While you sleep, your brain is working. For example, sleep helps prepare your brain to learn, remember, and create.

Nedergaard and her colleagues discovered that the brain has a drainage system that removes toxins during sleep. "When we sleep, the brain totally changes function," she explains. "It becomes almost like a kidney, removing waste from the system."[1]

Everything from blood vessels to the immune system uses sleep as a time for repair, says Dr. Kenneth Wright, Jr., a sleep researcher at the University of Colorado. "There are certain repair processes that occur in the body mostly, or most effectively, during sleep," he explains. "If you don't get enough sleep, those processes are going to be disturbed."

Sleep Disorders

Some people have conditions that prevent them from getting enough quality sleep, no matter how hard they try. These problems are called *sleep disorders*.

The most common sleep disorder is *insomnia*. "Insomnia is when you have repeated difficulty getting to sleep and/or staying asleep," says Brown. This happens despite having the time to sleep and a proper sleep environment. It can make you feel tired or unrested during the day.

Insomnia can be short term, where people struggle to sleep for a few weeks or months. "Quite a few more people have been experiencing this during the pandemic," Brown says. Long-term insomnia lasts for three months or longer.

Sleep apnea is another common sleep disorder. In sleep apnea, the upper airway becomes blocked during sleep. This reduces or stops airflow, which wakes people up during the night. The condition can be dangerous. If untreated, it may lead to other health problems.

Getting a Better Night's Sleep

- Stick to a sleep schedule. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on the weekends.
- Get some exercise every day, but not close to bedtime.
- Go outside. Try to get natural sunlight for at least 30 minutes every day.
- Avoid nicotine and caffeine. Both are stimulants that keep you awake. Caffeine can take six to eight hours to wear off completely.
- Avoid alcohol and large meals before bedtime. Both can prevent deep, restorative sleep.
- Limit electronics before bed. Try reading a book, listening to soothing music, or another relaxing activity instead.
- Create a good sleeping environment. Keep the temperature cool if possible. Get rid of sound and light distractions. Make it dark. Silence your cell phone.