



How much sleep do you really need?

Laying awake for hours trying to fall asleep, waking up several times throughout the night, pushing yourself to stay awake or waking up early to get more work done: these are all common experiences. New studies show that on average, adults are not getting as much sleep as what is recommended for good health. Common knowledge decrees that you should be getting eight hours of sleep a night, but how true is this? Below we will look at the importance of getting enough sleep, getting quality sleep, and how to improve your sleep.

Sleep for the old, sleep for the young

The amount of sleep you need depends on your age, and lessens as you get older. Infants need the most sleep and as children age, they begin to need less and less. Healthy adults generally need between **seven and nine** hours of uninterrupted sleep, and often we are not getting it, as many adults report only getting five or six hours of sleep a night. Older adults at age 65+ begin to need slightly less sleep, but still normally require seven to eight hours.

Waking often, staying awake

New studies suggest that waking up over and over again throughout the night is just as detrimental to your health and your mood as getting fewer hours of sleep overall. This means that even if you have dedicated eight hours of your night to “sleeping”, if you find yourself waking up a lot, you are not seeing the benefits of good sleep, and may even be suffering some of the negative fallout symptoms of not sleeping enough.

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Bad sleep means a bad mood

When you get very little sleep, on days where you needed to get up very early to travel, or stayed up too late finishing an assignment, you probably have noticed that your mood is negatively affected. You might be irritable, extra-sensitive and weepy, and have less patience than normal. While these effects on your mood are apparent, your mood is also being affected when you aren't getting enough sleep on a daily basis, even if it is just a little less sleep than you actually need. Lack of sleep accumulates and can negatively affect your day-to-day mood and even lead to mental health problems like anxiety and depression.

Top tips for best sleep

Now that you understand how important solid uninterrupted sleep is, how do you make sure you are actually getting it? There are some very easy and effective steps you can take to improve your sleep. These all fall under what is known as **sleep hygiene**, a set of habits that you can adhere to sleep better and longer.

Stick to a schedule: Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day allows your body to settle into a rhythm. Try to stick to the schedule daily and if you stay up late or sleep in on the weekend, it should only vary by a margin of about an hour.

Make your bed sleep ready: Make the space you sleep in a space that is really for sleeping. Minimize the amount of technology that is close to your bed – that includes mobile phones, tablets, computers and TV. Try not to do other things in bed such as work or watching movies.

Eliminate distractions before bed: An hour before bedtime, stop emailing, texting and checking social media. Try not to watch any suspenseful or exciting television programs. All of this is stimulating and will make it harder to fall asleep.

Exercise early and often: Regular exercise greatly improves your sleep. But finish up at least 90 minutes before you go to bed or you can actually wake your body up and make falling asleep more difficult.

Create a relaxing pre-sleep ritual: It might be having a bath or reading a book, or lighting a candle. Come up with some set of actions that welcomes rest and relaxation to do before bedtime.

As common as it is, bad sleep does not need to be a given reality. Implementing the above suggestions takes attention and discipline but they are proven to improve your sleep time and sleep quality. If you still find that you are waking up constantly or not falling asleep at all, you may have a more serious sleep condition and should talk to a medical professional to ensure that you are on the road to the best possible sleep.

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Letting go of work stress

I'm so stressed. These words are so familiar to us: we have said them and we have compassionately listened to our colleagues and loved ones utter them as well. Stress — both as an experience and a topic of discussion — has become so commonplace that it can almost seem inseparable from life itself. While not all stress is a bad thing, too much stress can be unhealthy. Let's learn more about what stress is and why it is so connected with work, why it can be harmful and some strategies for reducing stress.

What exactly is stress?

When we say we are stressed we usually mean we are feeling overwhelmed, burdened and run-down. What we commonly refer to as stress are our physical and mental reactions to **stressors**. A stressor is anything that poses a perceived challenge or threat to our well-being, and can be anything from the life threatening to the everyday. Stress triggers the fight-or-flight response in our bodies, which in turn causes other physiological symptoms to occur. These can include disturbed digestion, a rise in heart rate and disrupted sleep. These effects accumulate and cause the feeling of general anxiety and worry that we call stress.

How does stress affect our well-being?

Some amount of stress is normal and even necessary; as we rely on the increased attention and energy it gives in situations that are genuinely threatening. However, too much stress can lead to high blood pressure, insomnia and mental health problems like depression and anxiety disorders.

Why does work cause us stress?

For many people, work is a leading reported cause of stress. Why is it that our jobs are so stressful? The answer is that there are many potential stressors present in the average workplace. Some of these include tight deadlines that feel impossible to stay on top of, interpersonal relationships with coworkers and sometimes a lack of job security. Usually the factors that cause stress at work are interconnected and difficult to isolate. Although you cannot always control your environment or the stressful factors inside of it, you can manage your reactions to the environment. Below we will look at some things you can do to reduce work stress both in the workplace and outside.

What can you do at work to reduce stress?

- **Schedule breaks during the day.** Often when we are at work we attempt to push ourselves non-stop to accomplish tasks. This can exacerbate stress. Try to take breaks at least every 90 minutes and go for a walk or do something else that relaxes you. If you prefer a different rhythm, you can take shorter breaks every 25 minutes. Whatever you choose, you will have more focus and energy if you do not attempt to work without breaks.
- **Eliminate interruptions.** It can be hard to get everything done when you are constantly bombarded with emails, phone calls, and visits. Some of these interruptions are unavoidable such as your boss approaching you and asking you for something, however, other distractions such as texts and phone calls can be controlled. You can also control how you react to interruptions by choosing whether to accept the interruption, cut it off or make a plan to attend to it later.

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- **Deal with conflict gracefully.** It is inevitable that you will run into differences of opinion and conflicting personalities in any workplace. Rather than letting these small conflicts accumulate, it can actually be less stressful to address them head on. Speak to your coworkers about problems as they arise before they snowball into something larger.

What can you do at home?

When you arrive at home at the end of the day, do the best you can to leave work at work. Instead of worrying about what awaits you tomorrow at the office or what you left behind, channel your energy into self-care. You can also reduce stress by having a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, doing activities you enjoy and spending time with others. If you fill your time at home with these activities, you will also reduce your stress levels at work.

If you are feeling like stress is becoming more and more of a problem for you, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) for more support in dealing with work stress.

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