

Your Sleep and Overall Health

By Sarah Mosko, PhD

Even the very best sleepers experience a poor night's sleep once in a while and know that the day after can feel like a struggle. Besides feeling more fatigued or sleepy, our general sense of well-being can be compromised, and these impacts of sleep loss are multiplied when poor sleep becomes a persistent problem. Because life stressors are the number one cause of both short and long-term sleep disturbance, people dealing with a personal illness or illness in a loved one are especially susceptible to sleep disturbance. Given this, it's important to understand both the vital role quality sleep plays in enhancing overall health and that there are effective strategies for optimizing our sleep pattern no matter what our current stress level.

Humans spend roughly a third of their lifetime in slumber, so it should come as no surprise really that research has revealed that the health benefits of good sleep extend well beyond just helping us feel alert and rested the next day. Matthew Walker, PhD, is a leading sleep expert and director of UC Berkeley's Center for Human Sleep Science. In his recent book titled, "Why We Sleep," a fictitious ad cleverly summarizes the proven benefits of a good night's sleep:

Amazing Breakthrough!

Scientists have discovered a revolutionary new treatment that makes you live longer. It enhances your memory and makes you more creative. It makes you look more attractive. It keeps you slim and lowers food cravings. It protects you from cancer and dementia. It wards off colds and the flu. It lowers your risk of heart attacks and stroke, not to mention diabetes. You'll even feel happier, less depressed, and less anxious. Are you interested?

If a medication could provide all these benefits, who wouldn't be rushing to the drug store? But the wonderful reality is that thousands of scientific studies have shown how a full night's sleep supplies all these benefits and more. Here are just two of the mechanisms.

Sleeping enhances the body's ability to fight cancers, as shown by a marked decrease in cancer-killing cells circulating in the immune system (so-called *natural killer cells*) by even one night of short sleep. During deep sleep (i.e. non-REM sleep), the brain protects itself against Alzheimer's disease by flushing out and preventing the building up of the sticky substance called amyloid protein that is thought to cause the disease.

Being a good custodian of our sleep is fundamental to a healthy lifestyle. Research bears out the efficacy of the following five tips for maintaining a healthy sleep pattern.

1. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, allowing for 7-8 hours of bedtime.
2. Keep the bedroom at a cool 65-68°F and as dark as possible.
3. Avoid interacting with electronic screen devices near bedtime – the blue light interferes with falling asleep.
4. Minimize use of caffeine and alcohol, both of which disrupt sleep.
5. Don't spend time in bed awake "trying to sleep" – get up instead and do something relaxing in a dimly lit room and return to bed only when feeling sleepy again.

However, the sagest advice of all for anyone struggling with poor sleep for any reason is to avoid worrying about sleeping. The worry alone can keep you awake, setting up a vicious cycle of worry and sleeplessness. And, if needed, consult with a sleep specialist to get help in getting back to a healthy sleep pattern. In next month's "Ask a Doctor," sleep specialist and psychologist Sarah Mosko, PhD, will describe the program she's developed to help people get past a rough patch in their sleep pattern. Her contact is: DrSarahMosko@gmail.com