

# Get a Good Night's Sleep

## The Secret to Better Fitness

By Jennifer Salter, MSW

**E**veryone knows how fabulous they feel after a good night's rest. But how many of us consistently get enough sleep? Proper sleep not only makes us feel better, it enhances memory and cognition, immune functioning and tissue repair. Studies have linked insufficient amounts of sleep to heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, weight gain, Parkinson's disease and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.



The National Sleep Foundation in the United States maintains that seven to nine hours of sleep for adult human beings is optimal, and that sufficient sleep optimizes alertness, memory, problem solving, overall health, as well as reducing the risk of accidents. A widely publicized 2003 study from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine demonstrated that cognitive performance declines with six or fewer hours of sleep.

It has been found that a lack of sleep can more than double the risk of death from cardiovascular disease, but that too much sleep can also double the risk of death. It is possible that too much sleep is linked to co-occurring variables, such as depression or fatigue that results from serious illness. In terms of prevention, findings indicate that consistently sleeping around seven hours at night is optimal. ➔

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Sleep is also essential for tissue repair and recovery. Individuals who suffer from fibromyalgia, a syndrome characterized by systemic, chronic muscle pain, spend little time in delta sleep. Delta sleep is the deepest stage of the sleep cycle, when human growth hormone is released and our bodies heal themselves. Each sleep cycle is two hours long, and we require three to four cycles per night. Losing sleep translates into lost opportunities for recovery from everything from back pain to sore knees!

A lack of sleep also impairs immunity. Sleep deprivation of 24 hours can decrease white blood cell counts by 20 percent or more! By taking care to get enough sleep, you boost your body's ability to fight off colds, flu and other infections. In addition, you prevent getting sidelined by annoying ailments in the first place. Also, because many cancers are linked to immune system malfunction, its stands to reason that chronic sleep shortage may lead to an increased risk of cancer diagnosis. It is well-known that women who do nightshift work have a 60 percent increased risk of developing breast cancer.

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**Recommendations:** Insomnia is rampant in our society. Severe insomnia should be treated by a physician or naturopathic doctor. Here are some tips to get your much-needed rest:

1. Retire substantially before midnight, so you don't lose a sleep cycle. Moreover, we have more trouble falling asleep when we are overtired, just like small children do. *You cannot make up for lost night sleep by taking a daytime nap!*
2. Go to bed at approximately the same time every night.
3. Spend an hour before bed unwinding – take a cool bath or shower (to lower your body temperature), drink some relaxing chamomile tea, have a light carbohydrate snack, read, dim the lights. Move more slowly. Avoid stimulating activities like exercise, going up and down stairs more than necessary, engaging conversations, television and the computer.
4. Turn off your Blackberry / iPhone!!!
5. Sleep in a very dark room. If this is not possible, wear eye shades.
6. Keep the temperature cool where you sleep.
7. Do not drink large amounts of liquid before bedtime.
8. Exercise in the late afternoon - this has been shown to improve night sleep!

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