

[IMAGE]

Maximize Your REM Sleep

By Kevin M. Wong, DC

One of the aspects of human life that has remained constant throughout our existence is the need for sleep. Sleep is a behavioral state that is a natural part of life. We spend about one-third of our lives asleep, but amazingly enough, people generally know very little about the importance of this essential activity, and too many don't get enough of it on a regular basis.

The Consequences of Poor Sleep

Sleep problems are actually extremely common in our society, and they can have serious consequences. There are more than 70 known sleep disorders; among those, sleep apnea, insomnia, narcolepsy and restless legs syndrome are the most common. Many people who suffer from these sleep disorders are unaware anything is wrong, as they have not been diagnosed or treated for their condition. Sleep problems also can lead to difficulty concentrating, memory lapses, loss of energy, fatigue and emotional instability, and in the longer term, can elevate your risk of serious health conditions including high blood pressure and heart attack. And poor sleeping can cause difficulties with learning, memory, thinking and feelings, which may lead to poor school and work performance. Furthermore, problem sleepiness can manifest as drowsy driving or workplace accidents and errors. Lifestyle factors and sleep disorders can cause problems with sleeping.

Lifestyle factors include not getting enough sleep, having an irregular sleep schedule, and using alcohol or certain medications. Sleep problems could also be caused, at least in part, by stress or anxiety about work, family and finances.

REM Sleep - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Sleep: An Essential Activity

Sleep is not just something to fill time when a person is inactive; it is a required activity for normal body and brain functioning. We all recognize and feel the need to sleep. After sleeping, we recognize changes that have occurred, as we feel rested and more alert. In short, sleep is absolutely required for our survival.

We all understand the basic importance of sleep: to regenerate the mind and the body, and give it the rest it needs to function properly. Although each person varies in the amount of sleep they require, the average

amount should be at least 6-7 hours per night. There are multiple "stages" of sleep, but in general, there are two major sleep cycles, with the second cycle being of particular importance. This second cycle, known as REM (rapid eye movement), is the period of deep, restful sleep. It is also known as the dream phase, and it is very essential to getting enough rest.

For sleep being such an important activity, it gets relatively little focus or attention. Think about your own life for a second. Are there any events or circumstances that could be affecting your ability to have a sound night's rest? What could these events be? Have you thought about the quality of your sleep? Are you getting enough? Are you comfortable when you sleep? These are just some of the questions that need to be addressed.

Aside from some of the more serious things that could be negatively affecting your sleep, there are some variables or situations that you can have more control over. Let's talk about how to change your sleeping conditions so you sleep easier and get the rest your body needs.

The Right Sleep Position

Our bodies can assume some strange positions when we fall asleep. Many incidents of pain and discomfort during sleep can be traced back to your position during the night. It is very interesting to note that the positions you sleep in now are the same ones you liked as a baby. It is how you are most comfortable - for better or worse.

The position that is the least stressful on your body is on your back with a pillow under your neck and another under your knees so they are comfortably bent. Bent knees give the lower (lumbar) spine support. The pillow under the neck gives it support as well. However, not many people are able to stay in this position for an entire night. Also, people who snore tend to avoid sleeping on their back because their snoring becomes worse.

The next best position is on your side. If you are going to sleep like this, a pillow needs to be under your neck and between your knees. The pillow between the knees should keep your legs hip-width apart. This will adequately support your lower spine and pelvis. The problem with this position is the pressure it can put on the point of the shoulder. If you don't use a pillow between the knees, this contributes to lower back pain or other problems.

The worst option is sleeping on your stomach. Stomach sleeping is not very healthy for your body because you have to turn your head to either side in order to breathe. This puts the neck into extreme rotation, and it can strain the surrounding muscles and place stress on the spine. If you find you cannot keep yourself from rolling onto your stomach when you sleep, then at least put a pillow under your chest to help flex your neck forward a bit for some support.

It is very hard to change how you sleep, but it can be done. It just takes some practice. The key is to find positions that are healthy and stress free for your body. This will allow you to stay asleep longer and deeper, which will maximize the quality of sleep you experience.

The Right Mattress

There are many opinions on mattresses, and there is no easy answer as to which type is best. The reason it is so hard to find a good mattress is because each of our bodies is different. With all of the marketing from the mattress companies out there, it is enough to make your head spin. One says "firm," another says "pillow top." What do you do? Here are some general guidelines to follow:

- Try to have as firm and supportive of a mattress as you can for your body. You will have to lie on the mattress longer than just a few minutes in the store. Most people won't even be able to tell until they take the mattress home and sleep on it for awhile.
- Find out about the warranty. Good mattress companies provide a warranty that pretty much guarantees your satisfaction. It may include a trial period (to see if the bed works) and a money-back guarantee if you don't like it.
- Pillow tops are not necessarily a good thing. Much of the time, pillow tops soften up the surface of your bed too much, which means it will not support your body well. You need to see how it feels when you sleep on it.
- Memory foam mattresses and tops are very supportive, and they do mold to your body. The only drawback is that they can trap heat. If you run hot at night, this may not be the mattress for you.

The Right Pillow

Pillows come in all shapes, sizes and prices. There are so many choices that selecting the right pillow can seem daunting. Here is my advice: In general, your pillow must support you in the sleep positions you are in at night. If you only sleep on your back, your pillow must support your neck accordingly. If you only sleep

on your side, the pillow must be thick enough to support the entire part of the body from the neck to the shoulder at a 90 degree angle. If you sleep on both your back and your side, the pillow needs to support both positions.

Custom-made pillows are available that can provide you with the proper support for your body and sleep patterns. Your doctor can actually take measurements of your body so a pillow can be created to fit you perfectly. I highly suggest you invest the time in finding the pillow that best supports you.

Sleep is truly an important time for our bodies to rest and regenerate. Since we spend so much time engaged in this activity, it makes sense that we should take a closer look at our sleep habits. By evaluating sleep position and mattress/pillow selection, you will improve your ability to experience deeper and more restful sleep. Changes won't happen overnight, but you will see results over time. If you're have any questions about how to get a good night's sleep or want more information, talk to your doctor.

Set the Stage for Quality Sleep

Getting enough sleep is only half the battle; making sure you enjoy quality sleep is an entirely different story. Here are seven tips to make sleep a truly restful, rejuvenating experience, courtesy of the Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com):

- Stick to a schedule. Go to bed and get up at about the same time every day whenever possible; this consistency helps reinforce your body's sleep-wake cycle and can help you fall asleep better.
- Eat light and right. Eat a light dinner about two hours before sleeping. Avoid foods that can prevent restful sleep, such as spicy or greasy foods. Too much liquid can also affect sleep by necessitating repeat bathroom visits during the night.
- Exercise regularly (but not right before bed). Regular physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, can help facilitate quick, restful sleep. However, don't exercise within three hours of bedtime; you may find it more difficult to fall asleep. Rest Easy Lady
- Create a sleep oasis. Make your bedroom cool, dark, quiet and comfortable. Adjust lighting, humidity, temperature and noise level. Use blackout curtains, eye covers, earplugs, extra blankets or a fan - it's all about creating the ideal environment for deep, relaxing sleep.
- Don't sleep the day away. Limit daytime sleep to about a half-hour in the mid-afternoon. If you work nights, keep your window coverings closed so sunlight, which adjusts the body's internal clock, doesn't interrupt sleep.

- Develop a bedtime routine. Do the same things each night to tell your body it's time to wind down - take a warm bath or shower, read a book, or listen to soothing music. Keep the lights low to help transition your body and mind toward sleep.
 - Time it right. If you don't fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, get up and do something else. Go back to bed when you're tired - not overtired, but ready to fall asleep quickly and sleep through the night.
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