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Sleep soundly

If you have trouble getting shut-eye, there are ways to improve your sleep and feel rejuvenated without risking your health.

In our fast-paced society, the risk of developing stress-related problems is high. When you use the word "stress," most people assume you're talking about negative emotional effects, but stress presents itself in many other ways: high blood pressure, headaches, sexual problems and intestinal trouble. For others, stress means losing sleep.

In fact, one of the most significant conditions associated with chronic stress is insomnia. Simply put, this means a person just can't sleep well.

Whether the difficulty is getting to sleep or remaining asleep, it's a common problem; almost all of us have insomnia from time to time. According to a 2001 poll by the National Sleep Foundation, nearly seven out of 10 Americans said they experience frequent sleep problems, although most of them have not been diagnosed with a sleeping disorder.

The wrong way to decompress

Different people have different ways of unwinding at night. One common practice is to have a few drinks. After a hard day's work, some choose to relax with a few cold beers, wine or a cocktail or two. The rationale: Drinking is a way to decompress after a stressful day, which, in turn, should help you sleep, right? Wrong.

When it comes to sleep, alcohol is a funny thing. Alcohol certainly may have a calming effect at bedtime, but don't count on it to help you sleep through the night. Research has shown that alcohol disrupts the normal sleep pattern, particularly later in the night, and leads to diminished energy and fatigue the next day. Also, those who regularly drink alcohol before bedtime find that its ability to make them sleepy decreases over time.

Your brain is busy all night

Sleep is your body's way of recharging its batteries. Consider it nature's way of allowing your system to recover from the day's grind and prepare you for the next day's challenges. Although most folks think of sleep as a very inactive state, quite the opposite is true. As you sleep, your brain goes through cycles, called stages, progressing from very light sleep to deep sleep. Four of these stages occur before the onset of what is called rapid eye movement sleep. During this REM phase, we dream. Here's what happens: You start sleeping very lightly and systematically progress through the various stages of non-REM sleep, moving from Stage 1 to Stage 4 (see "The sleep cycle"). At this point you enter the REM phase of sleep, which can last from several minutes to an hour, getting longer with each subsequent cycle. Afterward, the cycle repeats.

Don't disturb the cycle

Alcohol tends to disrupt this very coordinated cycle of stages. According to the National Institutes of Health, drinking alcohol within an hour of bedtime can disrupt the second half of the sleep period. During this fitful period, you can wake up and then have difficulty falling back asleep. As a result, your body doesn't get the rejuvenation it needs.

Insomnia significantly upsets many people's lives. Don't make the mistake of adopting unhealthful behaviors to try to combat the problem. Instead, focus on tactics that improve your sleep without compromising your health (see "How to get a better night's rest").

The sleep cycle

Stage 1: Lightest sleep. Can be awakened easily.

Stage 2: Light sleep. Body temperature decreases.

Stages 3 and 4: Deep sleep. Known as slow-wave or delta sleep, it's characterized by rhythmic breathing. Stage 4 is more intense than Stage 3.

Stage 5: REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Intense dreaming occurs from heightened brain activity, but this is a lighter sleep than Stages 3 and 4.

A person may go through five sleep cycles in a typical night. The cycles recur in sequence, with the first one usually lasting about 100 minutes.

How to get a better night's rest

Exercise regularly, but not just before bedtime.

Go to bed at the same time every night, and avoid taking long naps during the day.

Finish up any work-related tasks early in the evening so you don't take stress to bed with you.

Don't eat for a couple of hours before bedtime.

Make sure your bedroom is conducive to a good night's sleep. Keep it dark, quiet and cool. Large pets need to stay off the bed.

Don't toss and turn. If you wake up in the middle of the night, get out of bed and go to a relaxing area where you can read until you become sleepy. Then, head back to bed.

Exercise busts headaches

Medication can temporarily relieve tension headaches. But did you know that exercise may help prevent them?

"No studies currently demonstrate why, but in a recently published paper, women who suffered tension-type headaches said exercise helped," says Jerry Swanson, of the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine. "They also noted that in periods when they didn't exercise, headaches were worse."

The consensus from doctors: If you stay fit, you have fewer headaches. Regular aerobic exercise seems to help, as do yoga and stretching.

If you experience chronic headaches or if exercise brings on a headache, contact your doctor.

Ease your joints

Fatty fish, like salmon, can thwart rheumatoid arthritis.

How much can diet affect arthritis? In some cases, quite a bit. Help prevent or ease it with foods and supplements that curb inflammation.

FOR RHEUMATOID ARTHRITIS

Eat fish. Omega-3 fish oil is a powerful anti-inflammatory. Recent Danish research shows that people who ate an extra ounce of fatty fish a day, like salmon, cut their risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis by 49%.

Cut meat. In other research, meat promoted inflammation and RA, while vegetables helped deter it, and a vegetarian diet reduced symptoms.

Take fish oil and olive oil. High doses of fish oil, or fish oil and olive oil, cut joint pain, morning stiffness and fatigue, and added handgrip strength, a recent study says. Daily doses: 3,000mg fish oil (EPA and DHA types) and 2 teaspoons olive oil. See a doctor before taking megadoses of fish oil.

FOR OSTEOARTHRITIS

Lose weight. In obese arthritics, a 10% weight loss boosted knee joint function by 28%.

Get antioxidants. The Arthritis Foundation says that antioxidants and vitamins may fight OA, although evidence is mixed. In one study, high intake of vitamin-C-rich foods cut the risk of cartilage loss and progressive knee pain by 70%.

Try fish oil. Doses are unclear.

Take supplements. The best bet for relieving moderate to severe knee pain, says a recent National Institutes of Health study: glucosamine-chondroitin. It helped 80% of patients; a placebo helped 54%. Daily dose: 1,500mg glucosamine hydrochloride and 1,200mg chondroitin sulfate. Contrary to some reports, it didn't raise blood glucose, cholesterol or pressure.

Best bets against colon cancer

Surprise: The long-held theory that fat causes colon cancer while fiber prevents it has not panned out, says cancer-diet researcher John Baron, M.D., of Dartmouth Medical School. Example: A new Harvard analysis of 726,000 people finds no link between colorectal cancer and a lack of fiber from cereals, fruits and vegetables.

Your best bets are to see your doctor about screening and:

Restrict red meat, especially cooked well-done, Baron says. In a major study of 478,000 people, those who ate 6 ounces of red and/or processed meat daily were one-third more likely to have colon cancer than those who ate less than 1 ounce a day.

Eat fish. On the other hand, people who eat 3 ounces of fish a day have one-third lower risk than those eating less than 2.5 ounces of fish a week. Poultry had no effect on colon cancer.

Go easy on alcohol. Two drinks a day boost colon cancer risk 16%, and three drinks daily raise it 40%, finds Harvard research.

Eat cruciferous vegetables. Cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower have anti-carcinogens.

Get calcium and D. Baron found that 1,200mg a day of calcium carbonate cut the recurrence of polyps (tiny growths that can lead to cancer) by 19% in a four-year test. In other research, 1,000 IU of vitamin D a day cut colon cancer risk 50%.

Watch your weight. Obese or overweight men are 2 1/2 times more likely to have colon cancer, according to a new German study.

THE LATEST FROM THE LAB

HELPS	HURTS	DOESN'T MATTER
Broccoli/cabbage	Red meat	Fiber
Calcium	Alcohol	Poultry
Fish	Being fat	Eating fat