

SLEEP

Developing habits for quality and restful sleep



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Are you getting QUALITY sleep?

You have heard for years that we should be sleeping for 8 hours every night. For most this will look something like going to bed around 10-10:30p and waking up around 6-6:30a. That means everything is okay and you are getting all of the sleep you need right?

If this is you and you find yourself with any of the following I would venture to say your sleep is not as good as you may think.

Do you:

- Have a hard time falling asleep? Maybe you lay there for 30-60 minutes before you finally drift away.
- Wake up frequently or toss and turn?
- Wake up still feeling exhausted and rushing for a cup of coffee to “get your day started”?

Quality sleep should leave you feeling rested and ready to attack your day.

How quality sleep will help you reach your goals

At this point, if you have been following my articles you should have goals that come to the top of your mind. If your goals pertain to improving your health, body composition, or mental/physical performance then getting quality sleep will be a key factor in achievement.

Sleep is the time when our body recovers from the stressors and demands we place on it in our waking hours. Nutritional choices are the building blocks for changing the way our body functions, however, sleep is the time when our construction crew comes in and gets to work!

Poor sleep has been shown to:

- Increase the risk for common diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, obesity, dementia, and Alzheimer's.
- Decrease mental performance and IQ scores
- Increase the risk for mental health disorders
- Decrease physical performance and recover

Quality sleep is the key to allowing your body to recover and grow from the healthy nutrition and movement you are feeding it!

Why supplements and pharmaceuticals shouldn't be your first line of defense

How many times have you or someone you know said "I am always tired and have a hard time falling asleep" followed by someone else saying "You should take (name any supplement or pharmaceutical)."

In our society, we are fast to suggest pills or quick fixes for our issues rather than addressing the behavioral and lifestyle factors that are likely causing the problem.

If we are not addressing the controllable factors in our life we will never know the actual cause of the issues we have. Take a more simple example of finding something in a messy room. You go into a room to look for something very important but everything else in the room is scattered. You dig through and push things out of the way frustrated because you can't find what you are looking for. Eventually, you give up and decide it isn't that important. What if instead, you decided to clean the room first? You put everything in its place and then you can come to one of two conclusions. The thing you were looking for was there all along and you just needed to keep everything else in check to be able to find it or the object wasn't ever there and you need to replace it.

This is the same with our health, we are often operating from a place of chaos, constantly wondering if the single thing we are looking for is missing rather than finding order and realizing it was there all along.

When you take the time to develop behavioral and lifestyle habits your health comes to a place of order. This allows you to decide if you need to add supplements or pharmaceuticals into your routine to further your health or if finding order was the key all along.

Restful Sleep Vs. Unconscious Sleep

Another quick note related to taking medications for sleep.

Many studies have demonstrated that when we take these compounds they place us in an unconscious state rather than a sleep state. While you may think “Isn’t sleep an unconscious state anyway?” there is a difference between being in a restful state going in and out of proper sleep cycles vs. being unconscious. Alcohol is one of the main substances people use to “help them relax and fall asleep” but due to the toxic nature of alcohol, our body isn’t taking the time to restore our body and promote health. Instead, it is spending its resources processing the compounds we consume and trying to eliminate them from our body before it has the opportunity to focus on recovery.

Five Habits for Better Sleep

Consistent sleep-wake times

Preparing your body for rest is essential to ensuring that you will get a good night's sleep. You should strive for a consistent bedtime and waketime every day. If you have to wake up at 6 am to get ready for work then you should plan to get in between 9 and 9:30 pm. Once you do this consistently your body will expect it and you will naturally become tired around your normal bedtime. Consistent sleep-wake times along with proper light exposure will regulate our circadian rhythm.

Circadian rhythm is our body's internal clock that tells us when it's time to be on the move and when it is time to relax and sleep

No food within 90 minutes of bedtime

As it relates to recovery and health you should not be eating close to bedtime. Consuming meals before bed has been shown to increase weight gain and dysregulate hormones related to sleep and hunger. While you are sleeping your body wants to focus on recovery, not digestion. Depending on the food we eat our body can take anywhere from 60-180 minutes to digest. If you are eating a meal at 9 pm and going to bed at 9:30 your body will not be done digesting that food until midnight or later! This means that now instead of getting 8 hours of restful sleep you may be lucky to achieve 5 hours.

Eliminate Artificial light for at least 60 minutes before sleeping

Light is one of the bigger issues in our modern society. Many of us will have overhead lights, TVs, or cell phones running until the moment we go to sleep (maybe even after if you fall asleep with the TV on). This is a big problem for us as light is the signal to our body that it is daytime and we should be alert. If you are exposing yourself to artificial light after the sun is down you are suppressing your natural melatonin (the hormone that helps you fall asleep) making it much harder for you to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Sleep in a cool and dark environment

Another important aspect of sleep is the environment in which we rest. To the best of our abilities, our bedroom should be cool (60-65 degrees) and dark (as little light as possible). Our bodies have a natural rhythm of regulating temperature much like the earth. In the early morning and daytime, it begins to warm up to a peak in the afternoon and then cools down into the evening and nighttime. Being that our ancestors spent all of their time outside it makes sense that our body follows a similar cycle with temperature. Having a dark environment is essential for the reasons stated above.

Get at least 5-10 minutes of Sunlight in the morning

Light exposure during the evening is less than optimal for our sleep, however, light in the morning is critical. When the sun comes up and crosses our retina it starts our circadian rhythm for the day. This means that receiving the stimulus of light early on in the morning will help our bodies know when it's time to settle down and go to sleep. Many of us spend so much of our time inside that we rarely get natural light. This leaves our bodies confused and guessing when it is daytime and when it is nighttime.

Take-Home Message

As always we can bring this back to our ancestors. How would they have regulated their sleep-wake cycles, light exposure, eating times, and sleep environment? The fact is that they wouldn't have had to worry about any of these things. They would have risen with the morning sun while receiving the signal they needed that it was daytime. After going about their day they would have eaten as much as they could before calming down as the sunset. The temperature would have begun to drop and there would be no artificial light to worry about as they drifted to sleep.

We may have more obstacles to overcome in this department than our ancestors but all in all the habits I listed above are completely under your control and will serve your health and energy levels if you choose to follow them!

THANK YOU FOR READING!



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