

## Getting enough sleep can often be the best medicine

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

If you didn't get enough zzzs last night, you're not alone. About 30 percent of all Americans report occasional sleep problems, but lack of sleep can cause more than just droopy eyelids.

Regularly depriving yourself of sleep can harm your health physically. Getting a good night's rest can reduce your risk of diabetes, hypertension and obesity, says Michael Twery, PhD, director of the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research at the National Institutes of Health.

"It also affects your mind," Twery says, "because learning, memory and performance are all related to getting enough sleep."

Tragically, almost 20 percent of serious car crash injuries are possibly associated with driver sleepiness.

A recent study shows that people who sleep fewer than seven hours a night are three times more likely to develop a respiratory illness after exposure to a cold virus than those who sleep eight hours or more.

A healthy night's sleep starts with preparation, Twery says. But don't lose sleep over it.

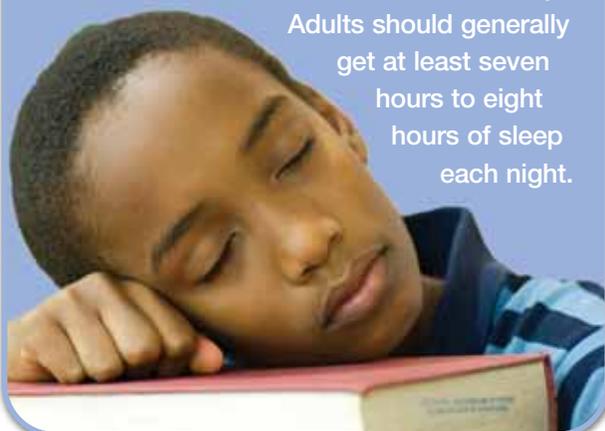
"Preparing for sleep should be part of your evening routine," he says.

### Make a date with the sandman

Sleep is essential for maintaining your health at all ages, says Michael Twery of the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research.

Newborns typically need between 16 hours and 18 hours a day of sleep, while school-age children and teens need at least nine hours each day.

Adults should generally get at least seven hours to eight hours of sleep each night.



### Sleep disorders

If you feel like you're spending a lot of time in the sack but still wake up like a sleepyhead and stay drowsy all day, you may be one of about 40 million Americans with a sleep disorder. One of the most common sleep disorders is insomnia, or difficulty falling or staying asleep. The condition requires a check-up with a health professional. Another common sleep disorder, sleep apnea, is associated with a two-fold increased risk for dying from cardiovascular disease. Signs and symptoms of sleep apnea include snoring, gasping for air when waking up and excessive daytime sleepiness or morning headaches, Twery says.

When apnea occurs, not enough air is reaching the lungs, Twery says. "This causes the heart to work harder, blood pressure to increase and abnormalities in sugar metabolism to emerge."

People with sleep apnea may have just a few or hundreds of these episodes each night, Twery says. "If you feel you have symptoms, or the sleepiness is a burden to your daily routine, then discuss your symptoms with your doctor."

### Get away from tossing and turning

If you're having trouble going to sleep, don't lie there tossing like a salad. Instead, get out of bed, go into another room, and do something relaxing, like reading a book or listening to soothing music.

### Warm up and cool down

A cooler body temperature is associated with better sleep. While exercise makes you more alert, it also causes your body temperature to rise, so finish your exercise at least three hours before bedtime. Late afternoon workouts are best for a restful night's sleep.

Taking a warm bath before going to bed can also help you sleep more soundly, as can a change in the seasons. A recent study showed that most people say they sleep better in the winter, which makes sense because a slightly cool bedroom contributes to better sleep.



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"What it boils down to is what works for you," Twery says. "A dark room that's quiet and comfortable is the best starting point, and if counting sheep helps, by all means, count them."

### Fight the light for a better night

Bright lights suppress the secretion of melatonin during the evening hours. Melatonin is a chemical that helps your body get ready for sleep. Quiet, comfortable, secure darkness can provide a better sleeping environment, so remove all electronic gizmos that emit bright light from your bedroom. Even high-tech digital clocks can put out more light than you need.

Use your bedroom for sleep, not for watching TV or playing on the computer, because all those lights disturb the normal rhythm of the hormones preparing your body for sleep. And if you get up to use the bathroom during the night, try not to use any more lighting than is necessary for your safety.

### Say no to Joe and yes to Bess

Scientists don't know why exactly, but drinking some warm milk or warm decaffeinated tea before going to bed helps set your body up for sleep. Some research suggests that the amino acid tryptophan in milk may have a role in helping you sleep.

Everyone knows to order decaf hours before bedtime. The best advice is to always avoid caffeinated beverages such as coffee for at least five hours before hitting the sack for the night.

