

Sleep

Tired much?

Keep up your energy by staying true to slumber. *by Karen Giles-Smith*

For health, sleep is just as important as exercise and nutrition, but can be just as challenging to fit in. In fact, getting enough sleep is the second biggest challenge for adults trying to achieve a healthy lifestyle, according to a nationally representative survey of 501 physicians done in June 2008.

Although scientists aren't exactly sure why we sleep, some compelling theories include energy conservation, and repair and rejuvenation of body cells. On Harvard Medical School's Healthy Sleep Web site (www.healthysleep.med.harvard.edu), experts explain that, "Sleep plays a critical role in immune function, metabolism, memory, learning, and other vital functions."

The ways in which sleep benefits the body may also boost sports performance. A study from the Stanford Sleep Disorders Clinic and Research Laboratory showed that collegiate swimmers who extended their sleep to 10 hours per day for six to seven weeks improved their athletic performance, including faster reaction and race times. The athletes also reported less daytime sleepiness, less fatigue and more vigor. In a similar study, collegiate male basketball players who increased sleep as much as possible for two weeks had faster sprint times and improved free-throw shooting.

You've probably had similar experiences: After a good night's sleep, you have more energy and can do more with less effort.

How much sleep is right for you? Although sleep needs vary, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (AASM) recommends most adults get seven to eight hours each night to promote optimal health and to feel alert and well-rested during the day.

The AASM (www.sleepeducation.com) provides these tips to get a better night's sleep:

- Keep a regular schedule—get a full night's sleep on a regular basis.
- Begin rituals that help you relax each night before bed.
- Don't go to bed unless you're sleepy.
- If you're not asleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed.
- Get up at the same time every morning.
- Don't have any caffeine after lunch.
- Exercise on a regular basis, earlier in the day and avoid tough exercise within six hours of your bedtime.
- Don't go to bed hungry, but don't eat a big meal near bedtime either.
- Don't have any alcohol within six hours of bedtime.
- Don't read, write, eat, watch TV, talk on the phone or play cards in bed.
- Make your bedroom quiet, dark, and a little bit cool.

A sleepless night now and then can be recouped with adequate sleep on the following three days, but with chronic sleep deprivation—say five hours of sleep each night for weeks—it takes two to three weeks of extra nightly sleep to return to baseline performance. The bottom line? Getting enough sleep is a side-effect-free wellness strategy that offers big health benefits.



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