

Sleep After Sixty

by Richard H. Cartabuke, MD

Internal Medicine and Geriatrics, Cleveland Clinic

Medical Director, Healthnetwork Foundation



I work in geriatrics. For many years when my older patients would tell me they were getting only 5 or 6 hours of sleep and waking up feeling refreshed, I would respond by saying, “Sure. That’s part of the normal aging process and to be expected.”

But starting a few years ago, I had to adjust my response. It used to be we thought that starting around age 65, people required less sleep because of how their sleep architecture changes—meaning the amount of time spent in various stages of sleep. But now we know that’s not true. Older adults need... wait for it... 7-8 hours of sleep. Sound familiar? It’s not much different from when you were 30.

A panel of experts from different fields in science and medicine was convened several years ago. They reviewed hundreds of research studies related to sleep duration and its relation to a variety of health outcomes—everything from heart disease to depression. Then they came out with recommendations for how much sleep people need according to age. You’ve probably seen this by now. Infants need 12-15 hours of sleep; Preschoolers need 10-13 hours; Teenagers need 8-10; Adults need 7-9 hours. Once you hit 65, the recommended amount of sleep drops to 7-8 hours. That’s as low as it gets. And yet, 40% of adults don’t even get the minimum 7 hours.

What I’m about to say might sound like an extreme statement—or, depending on your viewpoint, it might seem simple and obvious. Ready for it?

The single most effective thing 99% of people of any age can do to instantly improve their overall health is... SLEEP MORE.

Sure, we could talk about how to fall asleep faster, how to overcome insomnia, how to improve the quality of your sleep, supplements and medications to aid sleep, and on and on. But by far, the most data we have in the area of sleep is related to duration. And across the board in all the studies, the findings are consistent. So my recommendation to everyone reading this: *sleep more.*

I know that’s hard advice for busy executives to hear. You’re traveling, working long hours, plus maintaining a family and social life. But the stakes are too high to ignore this advice. There’s research coming out all the time linking chronic insufficient sleep to a range of health problems, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, substance abuse, dementia, and even increased risk of death.

Maybe you feel like you don’t have time to sleep 7 hours a night. I’m quite sure you don’t have the time or desire to deal with those kind of health problems!

Healthnetwork Foundation connects business leaders to the world’s best health specialists and creates customized medical philanthropy opportunities. For more information, contact Healthnetwork President, Megan Frankel at mfrankel@healthnetworkfoundation.org