

The A-B-Zzzs of Sleep

by Nancy Foldvary-Schaefer, DO, MS
Director, Sleep Disorders Center, Cleveland Clinic
Healthnetwork Foundation Partner Physician



Getting enough sleep is one of the easiest, cheapest, most natural things you can do to improve your health. And yet, 40% of U.S. adults cut their sleep short. If you're one of them, you are putting your health at risk, perhaps more than you know. At Healthnetwork Foundation our mission is better medicine for all, which usually means making referrals for major illness and facilitating philanthropy to advance medical research. But today, it simply means sharing some helpful information about this thing we all do every day (but some of us not enough): *SLEEP*.

Common, But Not Normal

A generation ago, it was almost unheard of for a person to sleep less than six hours. Today, it's quite common—but that doesn't mean it's normal. For optimal function, your body and brain depend on getting enough sleep. What's "enough"? The CDC recommends a minimum of 7 hours of sleep a night on average for adults. Less than that, and the consequences are no laughing matter. Health problems linked to insufficient sleep include: weight gain, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, depression, and dementia. A very small percentage (around 5%) of adults are genetically wired to be short sleepers and can get away with 4-6 hours a night. But most people—90% of us—need between 7 1/2 to 8 1/2 hours of sleep a night to function optimally.

Minor Sleep Loss, Major Consequences

Have you ever experienced jet lag from changing just one or two time zones? When you're living in chronically sleep deprived state (which most of us are to some degree), the rhythms in your brain that maintain sleep and wakefulness can get fragile, to the point that you'll have a hard time adjusting to even small changes. A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in the early 90s demonstrated how even minor amounts of sleep loss can have major consequences. Investigators tallied all motor vehicle accidents in Canada around daylight savings time and discovered a dramatic rise in accidents on the day after the spring time change, when we set our clocks forward and lose an hour of sleep. After the fall time change, there was an equally dramatic effect in the opposite direction: the day after drivers got an extra hour of sleep, accidents were way down.

Trouble Sleeping? Change Your Environment.

If you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, before you resort to supplements or medication, the first thing to try is changing your environmental factors. Limit exercise and use of electronics in the hours before bedtime. Optimize the temperature in your bedroom. Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol too close to bedtime. (Alcohol can help one fall asleep but it is rapidly metabolized within a couple of hours causing wakefulness.) Give yourself a buffer before bed with a pre-sleep ritual, like reading or a warm bath.

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