

Common Myths About Sleep



1 Myth: The brain shuts down and is inactive during sleep

In fact, the brain is very busy during sleep. Among other things, it sorts and processes information on what was going on that day. Then it cements these into your long term memory. This is a vital for learning and memory.

2 Myth: You can train yourself to get by with less sleep

How much sleep is needed each night varies between people. The average adult needs about 8 hours a night. Some need less, others more. Most of us know from our own experience how much we need to feel good the next day. Getting less than this builds a sleep debt. Sooner or later this will have to be paid back. You might not notice missing an hour or so every now and then, but it is not good to make a habit of it. If you do, you won't be able to think or react to things as quickly as before. Even if you don't feel sleepy, your brain won't be working as well as it could.

3 Myth: Sleeping in on the weekend prevents the effects of sleep loss during the next week

Sleeping in will work when you haven't been sleeping enough and you need to pay back a sleep debt. But you can't bank sleep in advance. If you are behind on sleep, it will affect how well your mind works. Things won't get better until you catch up on the sleep that you missed. Regular sleep habits help build a good, strong sleep-wake pattern and keep you at the top of your game.

4 Myth: Daytime sleepiness will always get better if you spend more time in bed

Good sleep needs the right length, timing and quality. There are a number of sleep problems that can worsen the quality of your sleep and cause sleepiness during the day. This can be the case even if you don't notice any problems at night.

Obstructive sleep apnoea is a common example of this. It is not normal to sleep for a long time at night and still feel tired during the day. If you do, a doctor needs to look into why this is happening.

5 Myth: Daytime naps don't help and they waste time

Adults usually don't need daytime naps if they have slept well for long enough at night. But they are useful if there has been sleep loss at night. If you do need a nap, it is best not to have one later than mid afternoon. This is so you can still get a good night's sleep. Also, naps that last more than 15 to 20 minutes can make you feel groggy for a while after you wake up. This is known as "sleep inertia". Napping is normal in young children.

6 Myth: The brain adjusts quickly to changes in your sleep schedule

We all have an internal body clock. This clock is set by when we get (and don't get) sunlight. This means we are at our most alert during the day. The time when we are the most tired is between midnight and dawn. Sometimes we need to change the times when we go to bed and get up. This could be because of shift work or changing time zones (jet lag). Some people cope better with this than others. But we all take time to adjust to these changes. Until we adjust, our sleep quality suffers and we don't function as well during the day.

7 Myth: We need less sleep when we are older

How much sleep children needs gets less and less as they grow up. But once they are young adults, their sleep needs

stop changing. The amount of sleep they need will stay the same for the rest of their life. As we age through adult life, sleep can get less efficient. This could be from body aches and pains, among other things. Because of this, we might have to spend a bit more time in bed. But apart from this, sleep needs are stable throughout adult life.

8 Myth: If children don't get enough sleep, this will always lead to them feeling too sleepy during the day

If a child doesn't get enough sleep, this can cause many other problems apart from just sleepiness. It might be that they can't concentrate well but don't feel tired. In some cases they behave badly, are moody and get into trouble at school.

9 Myth: Regular snoring is normal

Snoring from time to time is a common problem. Loud snoring on most nights is not normal and should be checked out. It often means something is getting in the way of breathing during sleep, both in children and in adults. This is known as obstructive sleep apnoea.

10 Myth: If you find it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep, the usual cause is stress

Stress can certainly make it harder to sleep. But many other causes exist. These include a variety of sleep, medical and psychological issues. Often the issue is poor sleep habits. If so, these can and should be dealt with.

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