

# Sleep and Your Health

Everyone knows that sleep is important. Without it, you don't have the energy to get through your day.

But sleep problems that go on for a long time can affect your health.

## How does sleep affect your health?

Most adults do best when they get 7 to 8 hours of sleep each day. Sleep gives your brain a little vacation. During this break, your brain has time to:

- Grow and repair cells.
- Form new pathways for learning, remembering, and processing information.
- Rebuild your energy for the next day.

Although having a few sleepless nights may leave you feeling tired and grumpy, it probably won't affect your health. But when you don't sleep well night after night, you can have what's called sleep deprivation or sleep debt.

Besides affecting your energy level and your mood, sleep debt affects your body in lots of other ways. For example:

- You may feel pain more easily.
- Your risk for heart disease is higher.
- Your immune system has a harder time fighting infection.
- You may have mood swings.
- You may have trouble learning, solving problems, and remembering.

And not getting enough sleep is linked with a number of chronic (long-term) diseases and conditions, including diabetes, obesity, and depression. While almost everyone feels sleepy in the daytime now and then, sleep debt can be the cause of serious problems like car crashes and work-related accidents.

## What gets in the way of sleep?



The everyday stresses of life—your job, your family or relationships, money problems, jet lag—can keep you from sleeping well. It's also common to have trouble sleeping when you have a fever or an injury. These stresses are often temporary.

Your habits and activities before bedtime, such as drinking coffee, watching TV, or using the computer, can also affect how well you sleep.

And some medical conditions can cause sleep problems that last a long time. These conditions include:

- **Sleep apnea.** Sleep apnea is breathing that stops during sleep. The problem can be mild or severe, based on how often your lungs don't get enough air. People with sleep apnea often have sleep problems. They also have a higher risk of high blood pressure.
- **Restless legs syndrome.** This is a problem that produces strong discomfort, aching, or twitching deep in the toes, ankles, knees, or hips—often during sleep. The symptoms can wake you up, disturbing your sleep.
- **Heart failure.** Many people with heart failure have trouble sleeping. This may be because of trouble breathing or because of depression or anxiety. Many people with heart failure also have sleep apnea.
- **Chronic pain.** Pain can make it hard to sleep, and chronic pain can lead to sleep debt. Chronic pain has many causes, such as back problems or arthritis.
- **Mental health problems.** Anxiety, depression, and mania can cause sleep problems.
- **Medicines and other substances.** Many medicines can cause sleep problems. Examples include antidepressants, cold medicines, steroids, and nonprescription diet aids. Alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, and illegal drugs can also interfere with your sleep.

If you have an illness that's keeping you from sleep, it can sometimes become a bad cycle. The illness keeps you from sleeping well. And without enough sleep, your body can't fight the illness as well.

## Getting help

If you often have trouble sleeping or feel very tired and find it difficult to function during the day, talk with your doctor. He or she can see if there are any medical or mental health problems that may be causing your sleep problems. And let your doctor know what medicines you take that might be keeping you awake.

A counselor or therapist can help you cope with stress and may offer techniques for falling sleep. There are also steps you can take on your own to manage your stress.

To help you fall asleep, you may need to change your routine before you go to bed. Try limiting caffeine. And avoid using technology devices such as smartphones, computers, or tablets before bedtime.

## Related Information

- Sleep Problems, Age 12 and Older

## Credits

**Current as of: November 7, 2022**

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