

Wellness Weekly

The “We” in Well-Being



Sleep Cycles

“Sleep is that golden chain that ties health and our bodies together.” —
Thomas Dekker, American actor

Sleep accounts for up to one-third of the human lifespan. But what exactly happens when you sleep? Before the 1950s, many people believed that sleep was a passive activity during which the brain and body were dormant. It turns out that the brain is very active when we sleep, and much of this activity is linked to quality of life and good health.

If you have ever felt foggy after a poor night's sleep, it won't surprise you that sleep significantly impacts brain function. A healthy amount of sleep is vital for brain plasticity, or the brain's ability to adapt to input. If we sleep too little, we become unable to process what we've learned during the day, and we have more trouble remembering it in the future. Researchers also believe that sleep may promote the removal of waste products from brain cells — something that seems to occur less efficiently when the brain is awake.

Sleep is vital to the rest of the body, too. When people don't get enough sleep, their health risks rise. Symptoms of depression, seizures, high blood pressure and migraines worsen. Immunity is compromised, increasing the likelihood of illness and infection. Sleep also plays a role in metabolism: Even one night of missed sleep can create a prediabetic state in an otherwise healthy person.

While many things impact our sleep, the two main internal processes that regulate sleep are circadian rhythms and sleep drive. Circadian rhythms are controlled by a biological clock in the brain. One key function of this clock is responding to light cues, increasing production of the hormone melatonin at night, then switching off this production in the morning when the brain senses light. A simple way to help regulate your circadian rhythm is to view sunlight for 5 to 10 minutes within two hours of waking and then again in the evening just before sunset.

Sleep drive also plays a key role: Your body needs sleep, much like it needs food. Throughout the day, your desire for sleep builds, and when it reaches a certain point, you need to sleep. A major difference between sleep and hunger: Your body can't force you to eat when you're hungry, but when you're tired, it can put you to sleep, even if you're in a meeting or behind the wheel of a car. Napping for more than 30 minutes during the day can decrease your sleep drive at night, so if you nap, keep it under 30 minutes. Be sure to listen to your body and prioritize getting enough sleep at night, so you can think and feel your best the next day!

Ask the Expert

April 11 at noon

Join a 30-Minute Ask the Expert session with Rachel Dawkins, medical director of the Johns Hopkins All Children's Care Network, to get more of your questions about sleep answered.

[Click here](#) to join the meeting.

Success Story

LaShon Powell, Patient Care Technician
Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center

Managing my blood pressure is my main health goal, and my daughter is my biggest supporter! Not only does she help me watch what I eat, she makes exercise goals for me for the month. If I start to get overwhelmed, I remind myself that it's just like eating an elephant — take one bite (or one day) at a time!

Healthier Together

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