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Got Sleep?

Most Caltech students are familiar with the saying, "Welcome to Caltech. Academics, social life, sleep: pick two." This article will present some basic information about the importance of sleep as well as some tips to help you get the sleep you need.

Much about sleep is still being investigated, however it is clear that in general sleep serves a restorative function for the body. Sleep is necessary for the body to perform many cognitive and physical tasks at an optimal level. It also appears that sleep may be important in the consolidation of long term memory. Several tragic events have been linked to human error caused by sleep deprivation (e.g. Exxon Valdez oil spill, nuclear incident at Chernobyl). Further, drowsiness or fatigue has been identified as a principle cause in at least 100,000 police-reported traffic crashes each year, killing more than 1,500 Americans and injuring another 71,000, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA, 1994).

How much sleep do I need?

The answer to this question varies for each individual. On average, people need somewhere between 7 and 9 hours of sleep each night. Young people (ages 12-25) need even more, probably between 8.5 and 9.25 hours per night. A good way to find out how much sleep you need is to go to sleep at the same time each night and see what time you naturally wake up without an alarm.

What are the effects of sleep deprivation?

Many people are tempted to pull an all-nighter to finish work in the lab, study for an exam or prepare for an important presentation. Here are some symptoms of sleep deprivation that may help you think twice about skipping sleep before an important event.

- Daytime drowsiness and nodding off during sedentary activities (microsleeps)
- Mood shifts, including depression, increased irritability
- Stress, anxiety and loss of sense of humor
- Reduced immunity to disease and viral infection
- Impaired memory functioning
- Reduced ability to handle complex tasks
- Reduced ability to think logically, critically
- Reduced ability to analyze new information
- Reduced decision-making skills and vocabulary
- Reduced motor skills and coordination—more likely to have an accident
- In more severe cases of sleep deprivation, individuals may become disoriented, hallucinate or become psychotic.

Making the most of your sleep:

Sometimes even when you make time for sleep, you may find that you have difficulty falling asleep. Here are some tips to help you get into a healthy sleep cycle.

1. Get on a schedule. Try to go to sleep at the same time every night (even the on the

weekends.) It takes your body 3-7 days of a regular schedule to reset its internal clock. If you are constantly changing that schedule, your body has to constantly readjust and you'll have difficulty falling asleep and waking up. If you struggle with falling asleep, get up at the same time in the morning, no matter when you fell asleep. This will help your body to be ready to wind down that night.

2. Wind down. Most people need some time after a busy day to wind down before they fall asleep. Give yourself an hour in the evening to do a quiet activity before you go to sleep.
3. Use your bed for sleep. You want your body to know that when you lay down at night it is time for sleep. The way to train your body is to avoid doing other activities in bed, such as reading, watching TV or talking on the phone.
4. Exercise. Working out can reduce stress and also improve the quality of your sleep. Avoid working out within 2 hours of your bedtime.
5. Naps. If you don't get enough sleep at night, consider taking a nap. This can help you make up for a sleep deficit. If you anticipate a night with too little sleep, research suggests that taking a nap beforehand will minimize the negative effects. Note: if you are struggling with insomnia, avoid naps because they can make it more difficult to sleep at night.

Sleep disorders and sleep deprivation are very common problems and there are quite a few websites devoted to these concerns. You might want to go online to take a self-report sleep disorder inventory or to find more information. A good site to start with is the National Sleep Foundation <http://www.websciences.org/nsf/> or click on "sleep disorders" at Sleepnet.com <http://www.sleepnet.com/> for an online sleep inventory. If you find that you wake up early in the morning and can't get back to sleep, your sleeping troubles may actually be an indication that you are depressed. There is a depression inventory available online that can help you assess your mood <http://www.queendom.com/depression.html>. We are also happy to discuss any concerns that you may have at the Student Counseling Center x8331.

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