

Why is Sleep so Important?

Sleep plays a vital role in good health and well-being throughout your life. Getting enough quality sleep can help protect your mental health, physical health, quality of life, and athletic performance.

Mental Health and Emotional Well-being

Sleep helps your brain work properly. While you're sleeping, your brain is preparing for the next day. It's forming new pathways to help you learn and remember information. Sleep helps you pay attention, make decisions, and be creative.

Studies also show that sleep deficiency alters activity in some parts of the brain. If you're sleep deficient, you may have trouble making decisions, solving problems, controlling your emotions and behavior, and coping with change.

Physical Health

Sleep plays an important role in your physical health. For example, sleep is involved in healing and repair of your heart and blood vessels.

Sleep deficiency also increases the risk of obesity. Sleep helps maintain a healthy balance of the hormones that make you feel hungry (ghrelin) or full (leptin). When you don't get enough sleep, your level of ghrelin goes up and your level of leptin goes down. This makes you feel hungrier than when you're well-rested. Sleep also affects how your body reacts to insulin, the hormone that controls your blood glucose (sugar) level. Sleep deficiency results in a higher than normal blood sugar level, which may increase your risk for diabetes.

Your immune system relies on sleep to stay healthy. This system defends your body against foreign or harmful substances. Ongoing sleep deficiency can change the way in which your immune system responds. For example, if you're sleep deficient, you may have trouble fighting common infections.

Athletic Performance

Besides making you feel better, sleep is when your body repairs and regenerates damaged tissue from the day's workout and builds bone and muscle to be ready for the next workout. Distance runners especially need that sleep/repair time to make sure that muscles recover from training. During the deeper stages of sleep, human growth hormone, (HGH) is released during slow wave sleep. HGH is a natural hormone produced by the pituitary gland and released into the bloodstream. HGH rebuilds damaged tissue while building stronger muscles. It also helps convert fat to fuel, and keeps our bones strong. "If you don't get enough sleep, you produce less HGH and it becomes harder for your body to recover from workouts. Too little sleep also leads to an increase in cortisol, which often comes out during times of stress. An increase in cortisol contributes to slower recovery times," said Shelby F. Harris, PsyD, CBSN, director, behavioral sleep medicine program, Montefiore Medical Center, Bronx, N.Y

Tips for Better Sleep

- Aim to get between 7-10 hours of sleep during peak training periods. The harder you train, the more sleep and rest your body needs.
- Set a bed time. Our body loves patterns and rhythms. Work to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day no matter if it's the weekend or workweek.
- 30 minutes before bed, shut off all electronic devices. Find a soothing bedtime routine; read a book, take a bath, talk to your kids or significant others, pray or meditate. Do something that alerts your body it is time to rest.
- Exercise. It seems counter intuitive, but when you exercise regularly your body sleeps sounder through the night.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark and cool.

Excerpts from BreakingMuscle.com and Running.Competitor.com