

Sleep and your brain

For optimal health, get your shut-eye

➤ Sleep is a time for you to rest and, hopefully, get refreshed and ready to face the new day. For your brain, sleep is a time for work.

During those blissful hours of shut-eye, your brain is playing an integral part in the maintenance of your nervous system, laying pathways to help you learn and create new memories. Some experts also think that sleep affords our brains the opportunity to rest hardworking neurons before they have a chance to malfunction. In addition, connections between neurons that aren't frequently

used may finally get a chance to exercise during sleep as a way of preventing their deterioration.


If you cut your sleep sessions short (or get less than the recommended seven to eight hours), you're interrupting these vital processes and, as you probably know, making it more difficult to remember things or concentrate. You may find it more difficult to work, drive or function in general. Hallucinations and mood swings may also develop in more severe cases of sleep deprivation.

Some very preliminary research also seems to suggest that poor sleep habits may age your brain and contribute to cognitive health problems such as dementia, but more research is needed. On other, more definitive health fronts, lack of sleep has been linked to heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

Here's to good sleep

Struggling to get that elusive sleep can be frustrating, but a good night's sleep isn't just a dream. To keep your brain in tip-top shape:

- **Schedule bedtime.** Going to sleep at the same time every night can help program your body into a healthy cycle.
- **Exercise regularly.** A good workout—if not timed too close to bedtime, or about five to six hours before you go to bed—can help you achieve a deeper sleep.
- **Skip the cigarettes, nicotine and alcohol,** all of which can negatively affect your quality of sleep.
- **Relax.** Read a book or soak in a nice, warm bath before going to sleep.
- **Avoid staying in bed if you can't sleep.** Find another low-key activity to do until you feel sleepy.
- **Keep your room cool, but not too cool.** Extreme temperatures that make you uncomfortable will keep you from getting sleep.
- **Wake with the sun.** It helps reset your body's internal clock. ●



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