

# For Your Health – The A to Zzzzz of Healthy Sleep

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ST. LOUIS - It's that time of year when it can be pretty easy to lose a couple hours of good sleep. Even if we're usually pretty good about keeping up with our regular bedtime routines, there can be a lot going on that can get in the way. Evening trips to the park or a late summer concert can keep us up later than usual. Uncomfortably warm bedrooms can make it harder to get to sleep and stay asleep. And the kids in our lives may feel summer coming to a close, bringing some extra energy and disrupted sleep in anticipation of a new school year.

Occasionally missing out on a healthy night's sleep is fine. But, when it happens regularly, it can be more of a concern and have a real impact on our health.

“Sleep is essential in maintaining good physical and mental health, as well as well-being,” said Yikyung Park, professor in the Division of Public Health Sciences at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. “Getting too little sleep or too much sleep disrupts the circadian rhythm – our natural ‘body clock’ – which leads to many unfavorable responses in the body.”

Poor quality sleep and short sleep (less than 7 hours a night) – have been linked to accidents, weight gain, weakened immune function, depression, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and some cancers.

“Sleep also plays an important role in brain health, such as learning and memory. Poor or short sleep is associated with cognitive decline, dementia and Alzheimer's disease,” Park added.

As important as healthy sleep is, 35% of adults in the U.S. don't get the generally recommended 7 or more hours each night. And around 15% of adults have trouble falling asleep, with women much more likely to have this issue than men, people with lower incomes more likely than those with higher incomes, and those in rural communities more likely than those in larger metro areas.

Sleep quality also varies significantly by race and ethnicity, Park said. African Americans, multiracial non-Hispanics, American Indians/Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders are more likely to experience short sleep than other groups. Such differences in sleep quality can be caused by a number of factors – from stress and discrimination, to demands of family and jobs, to building and neighborhood conditions that can make it harder to get to sleep and stay asleep.

While we can't control everything that might impact the quality and amount of our sleep, there are steps we can take to try to get as good a night's sleep as possible. Park recommends:

- Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day.
- Going to bed only when you feel sleepy.
- Putting away electronics at least 30 minutes before bed. If you need to have your phone, put it in silent mode if possible.
- Avoiding large meals, caffeine, and alcohol within a couple hours of bedtime.
- Getting regular physical activity, but not too close to when you want to get to sleep.
- Limiting exposure to bright light in the evenings.
- Keeping the bedroom at a comfortable temperature.

- Using eye masks or a white noise machine or app if light or noise are issues in your home or neighborhood.

“Finally, if you have high blood pressure, diabetes, a history of heart disease or stroke, and snore, gasp, choke or have silent pauses in breathing during sleep, or have excessive daytime sleepiness or fatigue, you may consider getting obstructive sleep apnea screening,” Park added.

In sleep apnea, you stop and start breathing many times during the night, and it can increase the risk of a number of serious conditions. Fortunately, it is also treatable. So, reach out to a healthcare professional if you have questions about sleep apnea or other sleep issues.

Taking steps to improve the amount and quality of sleep can be pretty simple. But it can take some time to put them into practice regularly. Start with one or two - and build slowly from there. Even small changes can have a big impact on sleep health, which can help us feel better, and improve our overall health and wellness.

It's your health. Take control.

*Dr. Graham A. Colditz, associate director of prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, is an internationally recognized leader in cancer prevention and the creator of the free prevention tool, [Your Disease Risk](#).*