

WHAT IS HEALTHY SLEEP?

When we are talking about “Healthy Sleep” we are talking about a consistent pattern of sleep and rest that allows your body the time it needs to repair and recharge. Healthy sleep enables good physical function as well as optimal cognitive function. Adequate sleep is an important part of your body’s self-maintenance allowing vital systems time and space to repair any damage and replenish any lost resources. Too little sleep can have serious health consequences particularly if it is sustained over a long period of time but too much sleep can result in feelings of lethargy and depressed mood and can also be an indicator of illness.



WHAT ARE THE FACTS?



There are a great many well researched theories, as well as a myriad of urban legends around sleep. It seems that every few years there is a new study released telling us what the ideal amount of sleep is and how to go about getting it. But at the bottom of all the headlines is always the fact that there is tremendous variety from person to person in how much sleep they need to be healthy.

If you are consistently feeling vibrant and well and have the energy you need to do the things you want to do, then chances are you are getting the right amount of sleep. If you are tired and irritable and have no energy to do the things that you want to do, then perhaps you are not getting the right amount of sleep. For most adults, the average amount of sleep required to be healthy and stay healthy is 7 – 8 hours per night, but it is also important to consider sleep quality and disturbances. Lying in bed for 10 hours tossing and turning may be less healthy than 6 hours of solid restful sleep. If your sleep is constantly disturbed and you don’t get to go through a whole sleep cycle, particularly into the deep stages of sleep, your body and brain won’t be getting the same amount of recharge and regeneration time.

1. Getting regular, quality sleep, for as long as your body needs it, is important to maintaining good health.
2. There are simple steps you can take to establish, maintain or restore a health sleep pattern.
3. Disturbed sleep can contribute to ill health or can be an indicator of an underlying health condition. If you can’t establish or maintain a healthy sleep routine, talk to your treating healthcare provider.

HOW DO YOU ESTABLISH A HEALTHY SLEEP ROUTINE?

Sleep hygiene (the practice of maintaining healthy sleep) describes a range of steps that you can take to support healthy sleep patterns. It may take some time to get into a good pattern if you’re not in one but like any sort of training it’s all about consistent practice!



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MAINTAINING OR RESTORING HEALTHY SLEEP

1. Routine is key. If you are starting a new sleep routine, you can expect it to take a good couple of weeks to set in so keep at it.
2. Make your sleeping area a space that is comfortable and calming. Move TV's, laptops, work related items such as a phone etc into another space.
3. Decide what your routine is going to be. Once you have a time that you want to be asleep, develop a routine for the 2 hours leading up to that point. The purpose of this is to give your brain cues to prepare for sleep so that when you get into bed and lie down, the system is ready to "power down".
4. You may start by dimming the lights around the house.
5. Enjoy a drink of warm milk or a relaxing herbal tea such as chamomile. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, sugary foods and drink and other stimulants.
6. Reduce the amount of visual and auditory stimulation to your brain – turn the tv off or at least be watching things that are calming and soothing. Stop any screen-based games, particularly if they are action oriented (racing, fighting) at least 90 minutes before you want to sleep. Consider reading a book in comfortable, but low light.
7. Consider using a meditation or breathing exercise to consciously relax your body.
8. When it is time for you to go to sleep, put yourself to bed, tell yourself it's time for sleep and lie quietly for at least 15 minutes.
9. If, in that time you cannot get to sleep and you are getting frustrated or becoming more awake, get up and repeat the last part of your sleep routine. Think of it as being about training your brain to recognise the cues for sleep.
10. Set an alarm for the time you want to be waking in the morning and, regardless of how well (or not well) you've slept, make sure you get up at that time. The other end of the sleep cycle is waking, so controlling that can have a positive influence of your ability to get to sleep at the desired time the following night.
11. Exercise and eat well. Looking after your general health will always help with your sleep. If your body is well nourished and you have done enough exercise to be physically tired (without being exhausted!), this will help you get to sleep and stay asleep through the night.



HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN HEALTHY SLEEP WHEN TRAVELLING?

1. It may sound obvious but adhere to your usual sleep and wake times as much as possible. When we are travelling we are often doing things that we normally wouldn't, at times of day we wouldn't normally do them. Trying to maintain your usual waking, sleeping, usual exercise and eating times, even if in different time zones, may assist when you come back.
2. Even if your time to go to sleep is different, use your usual sleep routine. For example, if you usually have a cup of herbal tea and read a book for 30 minutes before going to bed, keep doing that, even if it means going to sleep a little later, continuing to use those cues for your brain that it's sleep time will help you settle back into your usual routine on your return.
3. Create a restful environment for sleep. Sleeping out of your usual space can be unsettling. If possible, bring a pillow or blanket that is familiar to you – even a favourite pair of pyjama's to remind you of your restful bedroom at home. As much as possible replicate the lighting you have at home, block out unfamiliar street lights, use a lamp rather than overhead lights in your rooms as you prepare for sleep. Consider the ambient noise. You may benefit from using a white noise or nature sounds app while you travel to assist you to block out any unfamiliar noise from outside your room.



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4. Continue to exercise regularly and eat as you normally would. It's not always possible when travelling but continuing your usual exercise routine will also help your body stay in its rhythms. If you usually exercise in the mornings, keep doing that, if in the evenings the same. Eating when travelling is often as much a part of the adventure as anything else, however, in terms of maintaining your body's sleep patterns and overall wellness, trying to stick to eating habits that are as close as possible to what you do at home will assist you to stay alert and healthy throughout your trip and on your return home. Eating foods at the same time of day as you normally would is key, if you usually have a very light breakfast and larger midday meal, continue that practice where you can. Seek to eat foods that are familiar and usual for you, for example if you usually have oats and fruit at breakfast time and salads at lunch, keep doing that where you can.
5. Having said all of the above, this final point is most important. Don't beat yourself up over a short term variation in your habits. If you're in a hotel room in an unfamiliar city for a few days and you're lying awake tossing and turning trying to force yourself get to sleep you'll just end up more frustrated and less rested. Accept some measure of sleep loss and try to relax, lie quietly and just rest as much as possible.



HOW DO YOU RESTORE HEALTHY SLEEP AFTER TRAVELLING?

Sometimes the nature or timeframes of our travel means that we have little control over our sleep and eating habits and our usual routines "go out the window". Where this is only short term, a healthy body will cope but you can help it by being prepared. Getting plenty of rest and healthy food before and after the trip, scheduling a few days off at either end of the trip to allow some recovery, and as a minimum, maintaining your hydration throughout your travel will allow your body and mind the space they need to recover and return to your usual activities and routines.

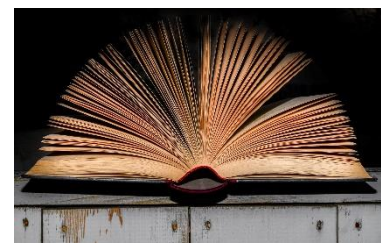
If you previously had a good routine that was working for you, but this has been disrupted by your travelling the best thing to do is to go back to your previous routine of sleep. It may have to be very contrived for a week or so, set a strong alarm, be very disciplined in your going to bed and waking up times but your usual sleep-wake cycles, if previously well established, should settle back in with a week or two.



If you didn't previously have a regular sleep routine and, following travel, are experiencing disturbed sleep, rule out any underlying health or medical condition and apply the steps listed above to establish a healthy sleep routine.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/10-tips-for-healthy-sleep>
- <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/healthy-sleep-habits>
- <https://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/about-us.html>
- <http://sleepeducation.org/essentials-in-sleep/healthy-sleep-habits>



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