

Sleep's healing properties

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(WebMD) -- Overlooking the single most important thing you can do for your health is easy with all the clamor surrounding various health products in the marketplace. But good-quality sleep goes far and beyond those products when it comes to restoring your health. And best of all, sleep is free.

Organizing your life so you get the highest quality sleep possible is well worth the effort. And quantity doesn't necessarily equal quality: You may sleep for many hours, but if your sleep isn't deep enough, or if your sleep cycle is disturbed, you may still be at greater risk for illness. A simple way to gauge the quality of your sleep is to see how refreshed you feel when you wake up.

A matter of hormones

Part of sleep's effect lies in hormones. During deep sleep, the production of growth hormone is at its peak. Growth hormone speeds the absorption of nutrients and amino acids into your cells and aids the healing of tissues throughout your body. The hormone also stimulates your bone marrow, where your immune system cells are born.

Melatonin, often called the sleep hormone, is also produced during sleep. This hormone inhibits tumors from growing, prevents viral infections, stimulates your immune system, increases antibodies in your saliva, has antioxidant properties and enhances the quality of sleep.

Rhythm and blues

Some studies show the value of maintaining a steady and natural rhythm in sleep patterns.

Researchers at the University of Toronto Center for Sleep and Chronobiology are uncovering important insights into how sleep heals. Dr. Harvey Moldofsky and his colleagues studied the natural rhythm of sleep by interrupting the sleep of a group of medical students. Over several nights, each time the students entered a deep-sleep phase, called the "non-REM" or "delta" phase, the researchers would interfere. After a few nights of these disruptions, the students developed the classic symptoms of chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia.

Moldofsky conducted another study examining how the immune system reacts to sleep deprivation. Researchers examined natural killer cells -- a component of the immune system that attacks bacteria, viruses and tumors. During the study, 23 men slept about eight hours the first four nights. On the fifth night, researchers woke the men up at 3 a.m., giving them four hours less sleep than usual. This one insult to their sleep pattern caused the activity of the natural killer cells to decrease by more than one-fourth the next day.

Five keys to optimal sleep

1. Rise and shine. Spending a few minutes in the early morning sun helps your biological clock align itself with the cycles of nature. Bright morning light stimulates the release of serotonin, the hormone of wakefulness, and helps the brain reduce levels of melatonin, the sleep hormone.
2. Have your evening meal early. Finish your evening meal by 6 or 6:30 p.m. so your body's digestive processes can be at rest when you go to bed. If you need to change your meal times earlier in the day to do this, then work backward accordingly.
3. Go to bed at 10 p.m. Your body was designed to sync with the cycles of nature -- including daylight and darkness -- with the optimal time for sleep falling between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. If you're in the habit of staying up much later than 10 p.m., begin getting up progressively earlier by a few minutes each morning, over several days. This will make it easier to go to bed earlier in the evening until you reach your target.
4. Reduce stimulants. If you find it difficult to get to sleep around 10 p.m., try cutting stimulants out of your diet -- particularly caffeine products like coffee, chocolate and black tea -- even in the morning. These take a long time to be eliminated from your body, and their effects can linger into the evening.
5. Quiet your mind. If your body is tired but your mind is active, try meditation or prayer. But don't make it hard work; use a simple and gentle form, such as repetition of a thought or phrase, or just focus on following your breath in and out. Relaxation music is another excellent way to soothe an anxious or active mind.

William Collinge, M.P.H., Ph.D., is a consultant and teacher in integrative health care. He has conducted research in integrative programs for cancer, HIV and chronic fatigue syndrome. He is author of the books "The American Holistic Health Association Complete Guide to Alternative Medicine," "Recovering from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome," "Subtle Energy" and the audiotape series "The Mind/Body Medicine Library."

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