

Shutting out bad sleep

The links between a good night's sleep and general health and wellbeing are clear, so DARE explores how you can get more – and better quality – slumber.

Words **KAREN BURGE**



ONE BAD NIGHT'S SLEEP can leave you feeling flat but what happens when quality sleep is out of reach, night after night?

The Sleep Health Foundation (SHF) says sleep is one of the three pillars of good health, along with nutrition and physical exercise. While you're getting your nightly shut-eye, your body is doing some remarkable things so that you wake up feeling refreshed and ready to function.

According to the SHF, sleep serves multiple vital functions. "It allows the body to repair and regenerate tissues, consolidate memories and support cognitive functions like learning and problem-solving. Sleep also plays a crucial role in regulating emotions, mood and overall mental wellbeing."

But despite its importance, four in 10 Australians struggle to reach their sleep goals, and it can impact their health now and in years to come.

GETTING ENOUGH Zs

Guidelines recommend people aged 18-64 get seven to nine hours of sleep per night and those over 65 aim for



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PROFESSOR DANNY ECKERT
Sleep expert

seven to eight hours. But this isn't easy for everyone.

Australian government research shows that while most people manage to sleep an average seven to eight hours, two-thirds of adults report at least one sleep-related problem and almost half report at least two sleep problems. Some of the sleep issues include trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, snoring and

waking feeling unrefreshed.

Professor Danny Eckert, director of the Adelaide Institute for Sleep Health at Flinders University, says there are many causes of poor sleep. "It can be clinical sleep disorders, insomnia, sleep apnoea or other medical conditions that prevent you from getting a good night's sleep. It might be menopause for women, cancer or back pain or shift work," he says.

But when sleep is inadequate it can start to meddle with your health and exacerbate existing medical issues. "Every single cell in your body is potentially adversely affected by inadequate sleep," Professor Eckert says.

HEALTH IMPACTS

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, poor sleep is associated with an increased risk of several conditions, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease and stroke. It can also impact our daytime energy levels and our ability to drive, work, focus and function.

A study published in 2022 in the *PLOS Medicine* journal examined 7,000 adults over the age of 50, and

explored whether sleep duration was associated with a person's risk of chronic diseases. Tracking data spanning 25 years, researchers found a "robust association" between short sleep duration (less than five hours) at age 50, 60 and 70, and a higher risk of multiple chronic conditions.

Professor Eckert also points to a large 2024 study undertaken by Flinders University that showed irregular sleep was also a cause for concern, with irregularities in sleep timing and duration increasing a person's risk of hypertension (high blood pressure).

The influence of sleep on pain has also been investigated by University of Queensland researcher, Dr David Klyne, who says "poor sleep coexists with chronic pain in up to 90% of cases". "Up until recently it's been thought pain causes poor sleep, but our research suggests it's the other way around – that poor sleep worsens and potentially maintains pain," he says.

"For example, if you're experiencing acute pain caused by injury, we've shown how well you recover depends on how well you sleep. [Poor] sleep primes the nervous and immune systems to >



SLEEP POSITION

Is there an ideal position to sleep in? Bond University researchers explored the evidence to uncover the best position for a good night's sleep.

They found that most people prefer to sleep on their side. "This is good to hear, as those who lie on their backs are more likely to be poor sleepers or have breathing difficulties during the night," the authors wrote.

"Even with our chosen position, some layouts are better than others. In one study, people who rested in a position where there is a rotation of the spine (such as the unsupported side position), woke up with more pain in the morning.

"Nonetheless, although some forms of side-sleeping may cause a bit of load on the spine, it appears the side

positions, in general, are still better than the other options."

The bottom line though is that being comfortable is key to a good night's sleep.

So, too, is choosing the right pillow, the researchers have concluded. "A lack of support for the head and neck during sleep has been found to severely impact spine alignment, and cause muscle problems such as neck pain, shoulder pain and muscle stiffness.

"Promisingly, the pillow material does not appear to affect the spine. Instead, the shape and the height is what matters. A U-shaped pillow may help you have a longer night's sleep, and a roll-shaped pillow can reduce morning pain and bedtime pain in those suffering from chronic pain."

IMPROVING SLEEP

You will likely need to make some changes to ensure your quality of sleep improves as well as your overall health. Here are some of the evidence-based methods:

LIFESTYLE CHANGES

The first step in addressing sleep concerns is to make lifestyle changes and improve sleep hygiene, says Dr Sian Goodson of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. "It's about your bedtime routine. Looking at diet, when you exercise, caffeine intake, alcohol consumption, screen time, how you wind down to get to sleep, and simple things, like taking a warm bath before bed, that can actually make a difference. And it's about tailoring it to the individual person," she says.

COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY FOR INSOMNIA (CBT-I)

Professor Eckert says there's strong evidence showing the effectiveness of CBT-I, which is a multi-component treatment that usually includes a combination of education, behavioural and cognitive interventions.

"The evidence tells us cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia leads to greater and longer lasting benefits and resolution of insomnia," he explains. "CBT-I is delivered by a trained sleep psychologist over four to six weeks, with weekly sessions throughout. That's your best chance of getting rid of insomnia, and if it does come back, you've then got the tools to deal with it."

MINDFULNESS

The practice of mindfulness, designed with a focus on sleep, provides an opportunity to create the mental space needed to allow sleep to come back, according to the SHF. If you'd like to try it, a good option is to download the free Smiling Mind app and choose the 'Sleep' options that are presented. The SHF says experts suggest doing a 20-minute or 30-minute mindfulness meditation six times a week to develop your skills, but even 10 minutes a day can make a difference.

SLEEP AIDS: DO THEY WORK?

What about gadgets and tools that claim to help increase your quality of sleep? While some aren't worth the spend, there are a few you could consider...



1. SLEEP TRACKER TECHNOLOGY

This can be a good way to bring awareness to your sleep patterns, much like fitness watches help us better understand our physical performance, explains Professor Eckert.

2. SLEEP POSITION DEVICES

Some people have sleep apnoea symptoms when sleeping on their back and in those cases, new wearable devices can give you a little buzz when on your back, helping to train you into a side sleeper, he adds.

3. MEDITATION AND RELAXATION APPS

There are many phone or tablet apps that offer relaxation instruction or mindful meditation that may make it easier to fall asleep. Your GP can recommend some options to consider.

enhance pain and potentially drive the development of chronic pain.”

So there are plenty of important reasons to prioritise sleep, but if you aren't getting enough, there are some signs to watch out for.

DO I HAVE A SLEEP ISSUE?

Professor Eckert says that if your sleep is inadequate, the impact might be felt in various ways, and ultimately, these are all reasons for a conversation with your GP. These impacts can include:

- moodiness
- waking feeling unrefreshed
- waking with a headache
- daytime fatigue
- concentration issues while driving
- being told by a bed partner that you snore or stop breathing
- not feeling like you're functioning.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Dr Sian Goodson, chair of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners South Australia, says when sleep starts to impact you day-to-day, it's time to speak with your GP. The doctor will ask lots of questions about your

sleep behaviour and routine to explore what's going on, she says. This includes questions about getting to sleep, staying asleep, waking during the night, hours of sleep, bedtime routines, screen time, caffeine and alcohol consumption, and how you feel in the morning.



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DR SIAN GOODSON
Royal Australian College of
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“It's a very thorough history. We also use that time to talk about other health issues – we'll want to know if they have other conditions and whether they're at risk of others.

“There are lots of different aspects to what affects our sleep, so we're really trying to hone in on what might be the cause. One of the things we're very attuned to is obstructive sleep apnoea [OSA], so we'll be asking questions related to this as well.”

OSA is when a person loses their ability to breathe freely while asleep, which can result in breathing pauses during sleep, snoring and daytime fatigue. It becomes more common as we age, and can be dangerous without treatment. The SHF points to strong evidence that people with untreated moderate to severe OSA are at an increased risk of having high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, diabetes, depression and accidents.

Dr Goodson says some common causes of bad sleep that she sees in general practice include stress, depression and anxiety, alcohol consumption and habits, and lifestyle. ●

