

Sleep in longer to stay fit

Health: Studies show getting at least eight hours of sleep at night helps regulates metabolism

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By Michelle Sathe
Assistant Features Editor

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If you want to stay fit and make wise food choices, studies show that getting seven and a half to eight hours of sleep a night can help, as it enables metabolism-controlling leptin.

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Want an easy way to stay fit? Try staying asleep longer.

Studies, such as the one in the 2004 Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism, show that lack of sleep can trigger a reversal of the appetite-controlling hormone leptin.

Leptin levels communicate to our brains that we are full, and are markedly dependent on sleep duration. Sleep deprivation results in triggering hormones in the nervous system that can lower leptin and leave you feeling hungry.

Other metabolism-controlling hormones are also affected by lack of sleep, not to mention your ability to make proper food choices while awake.



22412 12th Street, Newhall

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"If you don't sleep, you get hungrier and eat more carbohydrates, which puts on weight," said Matt Creeks, manager at the Stevenson Ranch Sit N' Sleep. "Some of my customers are surprised by this, but there's definitely a link between sleep and fitness."

According to Jay Kerwin, owner of Boot Camp Los Angeles, which offers personal training with a military theme, getting a good night's sleep is an essential part of a regular exercise routine.

"While you're sleeping, your body is fixing the damage you did to your muscles while exercising or just going about the day," he said. "So, when you get the proper amount of sleep, you get better results from your workout."

Kerwin incorporates a sleeping schedule into his Boot Camp clients' routine, a minimum of seven and a half to eight hours a night, which can initially be met with resistance.

"People have busy lives. They're up late at night watching TV or on the computer," he said. "Everyone knows how important sleep is, but it's not until they give it a try that they see what a difference it makes."

To help facilitate a good night's sleep, Kerwin offered the following tips:

* Determine what time you need to go to bed in order to get eight hours sleep. For Kerwin, who wakes up at 5:15 a.m., that's 9:15 p.m.

* Prepare for sleep in advance of your bed time. Brush teeth, floss, shower and change into whatever you like to sleep in.

* Turn off the TV. If your favorite show is on at 10 p.m., set your DVR to record it, and watch when you have time.

* Instead of TV, try reading a book, which can be very relaxing. Just allocate 15-30 minutes before your bed time to do so.

* Stretching can help the body prepare for rest by releasing tight muscles. Bring your knee to the chest, hold for 10 to 15 seconds, then roll it over to one side, followed by the opposite side, for the same amount of time.

* Placing a pillow under your knees can relieve pressure from sleeping on your back. If you're a side-sleeper, try placing a pillow between your knees.

* When getting out of bed, roll sideways instead of getting up and down, which can hurt the back.

"This may seem a little nerdy, but all of it pays dividends," Kerwin said.

Nutritionally, there are steps you can take to ensure a solid evening of sleep, as nutritionist Alyse Levine of Nutrition Bite in Los Angeles illustrated.

"Avoid really big, heavy meals that are rich in protein right before you go to bed, which can lead to heartburn or digestive problems that make it difficult to get comfortable and fall asleep," Levine said. "Protein releases dopamine, which makes you more awake and alert, so a big steak dinner is not a good idea."

While a glass of wine or your favorite cocktail may seem like a good way to unwind, Levine advises against it before bedtime.

"Drinking alcohol at night may help you fall asleep easily, but it leads to fragment, poor-quality sleep that can wake you up in the middle of the night," she said.

Caffeine is also a no-no after 2 p.m., as it remains in the body for up to eight hours.

That includes hidden sources of caffeine, such as soda, dark colas, cream sodas, fruit sodas and coffee ice cream, and even such pain-relief medication as Excedrin, which contains the stimulant.

Instead, Levine suggested the following to help lull your body into a restful state:

* Eat complex carbohydrate-rich foods, which release serotonin, a calming, relaxing, naturally-occurring chemical.

* Try foods with tryptophan, which has the same effect as serotonin. Tryptophan can be found in beans, bananas, whole grains, lentils, eggs, oats, peanuts and chick peas.

Perhaps most famously, high levels of tryptophan are present in warm milk and turkey.

* The ideal bedtime snack would be a small, easy-to-digest combo of carbs and tryptophan, such as a glass of milk with a strip of graham crackers, a banana with peanut butter or whole-grain crackers with low-sodium cheese.

Ultimately, getting those Z's might come down to mattress quality.

"If you're waking up different than you were a year ago, if you're tossing and turning more and not getting restful sleep, you may need a new mattress," Creeks said.

Sit N' Sleep recommends replacing your mattress every eight years, at a minimum, and has a diagnostic system called Bed Match to help customers find the right bed for them.

"It tracks how your spine curves, how your body weight is distributed and eliminates the mattresses that are not right for you," Creeks said.

"You can try adding a mattress pad or replacing your pillows, but that's kind of just putting a Band-Aid on the problem," he noted.
