



Sleep Your Way to Better Health

Want to ***lose weight, boost your immune system, improve your energy and performance at work and look years younger?*** The answer could be as simple as getting a good night's sleep. North Americans are sleeping less than ever before and the effect on our health care system is substantial. As a society we are attempting to accomplish more and more activities in shorter periods of time. Today the average North American is getting 2 hours less sleep than they were 40 years ago, with approximately 1 in 4 adults sleeping fewer than 7 hours per night. University students, shift workers and new parents tend to be more likely to suffer from these ill effects.

Working late, socializing at night or even watching television or spending time on the computer all erode precious time which could be spent resting our mind and body. During sleep the body is able to regenerate and repair itself. In numerous studies (one which tracked over 1 million people and another lasting over 16 years) a ***lack of sleep has been shown to contribute to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, poor memory, poor concentration and performance and a decreased life span.*** Mainly this occurs through changes in hormones such as cortisol, growth hormone, leptin and gherlin. This fluctuation can happen after just one night of poor sleep. Specifically the changes in cortisol and growth hormone have been associated with weight gain, insulin resistance, decreased muscle mass and premature aging. Similarly leptin and gherlin are believed to be responsible for increases in appetite and cravings for high carbohydrate and high calorie foods.

There are several neurotransmitters (chemical messengers in the brain) that affect our ability to sleep. Drugs which target the chemical messengers GABA (barbiturates), serotonin (celexa, paxil, prozac) and melatonin are typically prescribed by allopathic doctors in the treatment of insomnia. However these medications can cause drowsiness, have unwanted side effects and may become addictive. Fortunately there are numerous natural treatment options available.

Herbs such as valerian, passion flower and hops have been proven to have a beneficial effect on sleep through their effect on GABA. Similarly griffonia, Saint John's wort and kava kava promote healthy serotonin levels in the brain and are therefore helpful in getting a deep and restful sleep. Since vitamin B6 and magnesium are required for the formation and utilization of

neurotransmitters, supplementing with these key nutrients is essential in people experiencing insomnia. More recent research has indicated theanine, an amino acid which affects the central nervous system, can help calm the mind and relieve anxiety. Acupuncture and progressive muscle relaxation techniques have also been proven to be beneficial in this respect. Of course your diet is important as even small amounts of caffeine, sugar, artificial sweeteners and food additives can prevent many people from experiencing a proper nights rest.

Finding the cause of your sleep difficulties is the key to long term health and wellness. Always consult a health care practitioner before starting any new diet or supplement regime.

References available upon request.

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