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# *Sweet Dreams Are Made of*

**HOW MAKING TIME  
TO SLEEP CAN RESULT  
IN A HAPPIER AND  
HEALTHIER YOU IN 2022**

**BY KAREN GRECO**



# Zzzz

**A**ccording to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, Americans are a tired bunch. Eighty-five percent of us do not get the recommended seven hours or more of sleep a night. That eye-popping number is wreaking havoc on our health.

“Sleep is important for our immune system; it’s important for our health; it is important for our mood,” says Jason Graff, MD, Medical Director of Sleep Medicine at South County Pulmonology, who runs the Sleep Lab at South County Hospital. “Chronic sleep deprivation can result in symptoms that resemble depression, and it can worsen depression or anxiety if you already have those concerns. So you want to really make your sleep a priority.”

While scientists continue to study why we sleep, we remain in the dark about all the physiological things that occur. But Dr. Graff notes more recent data that points to the restorative nature of sleep in elite athletes. “We know more and more that a lot of repair mechanisms are very active in sleep,” he says. “We know that insufficient sleep increases your risk of infections, such as the common cold. It’s somewhat immunosuppressive to be chronically sleep deprived.”

In terms of metabolic damage, “the relationship is complex. When it comes to cardiovascular disease, it’s largely related to elevated levels of inflammation. In sleep studies, even after short periods of sleep deprivation, you can see inflammatory markers go up in the body and, over time, that promotes things like atherosclerosis, and ultimately high blood pressure, eventually leading to other cardiovascular problems.”

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According to Dr. Graff, there are four stages of sleep. Stage one is light dozing, transitional sleep. If you are a normal sleeper, you spend very little time in this stage. Stage two comprises most of the night; body temperature decreases and brain activity slows. Stage three is deep sleep, or slow wave sleep. Stage four is REM sleep. This is your dream sleep.

Those final two stages are where the magic happens: memory processes are consolidated, immunity strengthens, cells repair. If you miss them, you miss important health benefits.

“Most dream sleep occurs in the second half of the night in the early morning hours. People who cut their sleep short are really cutting out a lot of their REM sleep, which is part of the reason why sleep deprivation leads to

problems with memory, focus, and reaction times,” says Dr. Graff. It’s also why chronic sleep deprivation increases the risk of dementia.

So, how do we ensure we are getting not only enough – but the right quality – of zzzs?

As long as you’ve ruled out medical problems like sleep apnea or restless leg syndrome, the likely thief of sleep is lifestyle factors. Stimulants like caffeine taken too late



in the day can keep you buzzing through the night. Alcohol and sleeping pills will send you to sleep quickly, but keep you in stage two, so you miss out on the restorative benefits.

One hot topic is our electronic devices. The blue-wave light they emit mimics the UV wavelength of the sun. Too much exposure late at night can suppress the body's melatonin production and trick the brain into skipping bedtime.

Then there's the big one: stress.

"Blue light filters, night mode, etc. are helpful but not enough by themselves. You can have the filter on, but if you are getting stressed out right before bed, it's not going to help your sleep," says Dr. Graff. "I don't know that I've ever met a patient who read work emails right before bed and slept better because of it." Dr. Graff recommends dropping the cell phones and opting to do something to unwind prior to bedtime. "We need to practice more mindful relaxation."

The good news is, while you can't make up for chronic sleep deprivation in one night, you can pay down your sleep debt. "On studies of brain imaging, you can see areas of low-oxygen damage improve when patients are treated," says Dr. Graff. In other words, some of that damage can be reversed.

"You can get lost in the data of what percentage of this disease or that disease gets increased," Dr. Graff continues. "But in the end, if you're not sleeping enough, you don't feel very good. And I think that the quality of life portion is just as - or even more important - than that."

# DE-STRESS FOR A GREAT REST

RESOLVE TO ADD THESE TIPS FROM LOCAL EXPERTS TO YOUR SELF-CARE ROUTINE

*"Sleep, the main course in life's feast, and the most nourishing."*

- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE