Common Sleep Misconceptions

Chapter 2, Lesson 3
Don’t fall prey to these common myths about sleep!

In this final lesson of Chapter 2, you’ll learn about common sleep misconceptions and why they are not true. After all, everyone who is “early to bed, early to rise” isn’t necessarily “healthy, wealthy or wise.”

A few hours here and there of missed sleep won’t affect you.

You may not always feel different when you miss sleep, but even if you just miss an hour, it can be impactful. Missing sleep interferes with your judgment, can make you feel hungry even when you’re really not, and impedes your ability to respond to situations. Over time it can also weaken your immune system, hurt your heart and cardiovascular system, and disrupt your energy balance.

**Take Action:** Aim to meet your sleep requirement as often as you can to avoid accumulating sleep debt.

Sleeping more is better.

Some people do require more sleep than others; however, sleeping too much can signal a possible health issue. At the same time, if you sleep too much you may be at risk for many of the same health issues as not sleeping enough. Sleeping too much is a risk factor for depression, impaired brain function, diabetes and weight gain.

While sleeping recommendations are merely suggestions, following these guidelines can help serve as a base from where you should begin your sleep habits.

**Take Action:** If you find yourself needing more sleep, talk to your doctor to determine if there is something else going on with your health or sleep quality.

You can catch up on missed sleep by sleeping more on weekends, going to bed four hours early one night, or sleeping really late.

In Chapter 1 you learned about sleep debt, so you may already realize this is a misconception! Sleeping more in episodes is not effective for catching up on sleep and can actually make it more difficult to sleep. The best way to avoid sleep debt is through regularly getting the right amount of sleep for you.

**Take Action:** If you’ve already acquired a lot of missed sleep, try sleeping an hour extra per night to gradually pay back your sleep debt.

Aim to meet your sleep requirement as often as you can to avoid accumulating sleep debt.
Alcohol helps you sleep better.

Alcohol does not help you sleep better. In fact, it interferes with your sleep cycle. Drinking too much or too close to bedtime can prevent you from entering both deep sleep and REM. You may be able fall asleep faster while under the influence, but your quality of sleep will suffer greatly if you fail to sleep in the necessary stages.

Take Action: Avoid drinking before bed. If you are in a social situation or simply enjoy drinking, drink moderately to reduce alcohol’s effect on your sleep. Moderate drinking is defined as two drinks per day for men, and one drink per day for women.

Smokers need to have a cigarette right before bed in order to sleep through the night.

Many smokers need to have that “last cigarette before bed,” but it’s really best to avoid this habit. Smoking prior to bed actually stimulates your body due to the nicotine and tobacco. In addition to the well-known health consequences of tobacco use, it can also prevent you from getting a good night’s sleep. Tobacco users often find themselves waking up during the night. This is due to nicotine withdrawal.

Take Action: Quitting tobacco is one of the best things you can do for your health.

You can fall asleep easier with the TV on.

Just like drinking and smoking, having the TV on while falling asleep disrupts your sleep cycle by preventing you from entering the stages of sleep correctly. At the same time, the TV can influence your circadian rhythm due to the light of the screen. If you watch TV too close to bedtime, it may also influence your sleep quality due to the exposure of light. Same goes for using phones and tablets at bedtime.

Take Action: Turn off the TV and other light-emitting electronic devices 30 minutes before you plan to go to sleep.

Naps can help you catch up on sleep.

Naps can be beneficial if you are feeling tired or need a boost of energy. However, they won’t help you catch up on lost sleep. In fact, they can cause you to lose more sleep if you nap for too long or too close to bed. Plus, if you wake up in the wrong sleep cycle, you may end up being more tired than you were before your nap!

Take Action: If you do nap, the National Institutes of Health recommends limiting naps to 20 minutes and to avoid napping after 3 pm.

Everyone should get 8 hours of sleep each night

Sleeping 8 hours per night is not recommended for everyone. As you learned in Chapter One, sleep recommendations vary based on age. Plus, recommendations are simply a general estimate. Some people require less sleep and some require more.

Take Action: Talk to your doctor if you feel you need more guidance in determining how much you should sleep.

Sources
1. National Sleep Foundation: Sleep-Wake Cycle: Its Physiology and Impact of Health sleepfoundation.org

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