Are You Awake to the Importance of Sleep?

Bullfrogs and dolphins can go without sleep; during migration from Switzerland to West Africa, alpine swifts fly continuously for 200 days straight; and giraffes sleep for as little as 30 minutes a day. The rest of us need mu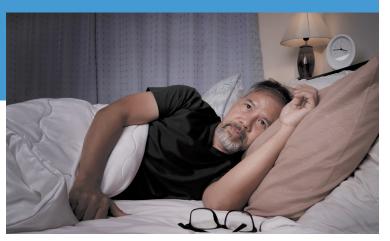ch more than that – about seven to nine hours of sleep each night – in order to stay alert and healthy. While you spend about one-third of your life either sleeping or trying to sleep, you may be unaware of the important role that sleep plays in your well-being

Why Good Sleep is So Important

Sleep has both short-term and long-term health effects. In the short term, not getting enough sleep affects your ability to function during the day. It leads to memory problems, negative feelings, stress in relationships, and an increased risk of falls or accidents. In the long term, not getting enough sleep can increase your risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes. When you're fully rested, you learn better, create new memories, respond more quickly to problems, and are better able to make decisions and pay attention.

There are two types of sleep which are linked to waves of electrical activity in your brain:

- **REM (rapid eye movement)** sleep happens when you're close to being awake. This is usually when you dream.

- **Non-REM** sleep is deep sleep that occurs when your brain wave activity slows down.)

These two types of sleep occur in cycles, with three to five REM-Non-REM cycles happening each night. You've had a good night of sleep when you've had several complete cycles.

As You Age, Sleep Changes

The amount of sleep you need as you age stays the same. However, older adults may go to sleep earlier and awaken earlier. Aging may also cause you to sleep lighter, leading you to wake up more often. Certain medical conditions or medications can affect your sleep. Sleep disorders, including insomnia (trouble falling or staying asleep), sleep apnea (pauses in breathing during sleep), and movement disorders (restless leg syndrome and periodic limb movement disorder), also become more common with age.

Sleep Problems in Alzheimer's and Dementia

Those with Alzheimer's disease and dementia commonly experience:

- Sleeping too much or too little.
- Napping too much during the day.
- Waking up frequently during the night.
- Wandering or yelling at night.
- Restlessness, agitation, irritability, and confusion as the sun goes down (sundowning).
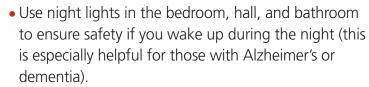
Not getting proper sleep could worsen the symptoms of these conditions. In addition, inadequate sleep can increase your risk of developing dementia.

How To Get Better Sleep

Some steps you can take to get better sleep include:

- Follow a regular schedule (go to sleep and get up at the same time every day).

- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine (read a book, take a warm bath, or listen to soft music before bed).

- Make your room comfortable (keep it at a temperature that isn't too hot or cold and try to eliminate noise).

- Exercise earlier in the day.

- Avoid napping and caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate, soda, etc.) in the late afternoon or evening.

- Limit screen use such as television, computer, cell phone, or tablet in the bedroom.

- Don't eat large meals or drink large amounts of water two to three hours before bed.

- Use night lights in the bedroom, hall, and bathroom to ensure safety if you wake up during the night (this is especially helpful for those with Alzheimer's or dementia).

Talk to your doctor if you feel more tired than usual, or if you're finding it harder to get enough sleep each night.

Sources

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