

Are You Missing One of the Most Vital Ingredients in a Healthy Lifestyle?

Source: Alliance for Natural Health

Hint: it helps you lose weight and live longer, it's enjoyable, you probably don't do it nearly enough, and there's important new research about it that you need to know.

According to Dr. Mark Hyman, besides eating whole foods and moving your body, the most important thing you can do for your health is to get enough sleep. Sleep deprivation makes you fat, and leads to depression, pain, heart disease, diabetes, and much more.

Even mainstream medicine agrees. In its report "Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem," the Institute of Medicine recently estimated that 50 to 40 million Americans chronically suffer from a sleep disorder, hindering daily functioning and adversely affecting their health and longevity.

Harvard Health Publica points out that lack of sufficient sleep can have consequences ranging from the mild to the life-threatening:

- A 2009 study in *Archives of Internal Medicine* showed that people who slept an average of less than seven hours per night were three times as likely to get sick from viral infections as those who averaged at least eight hours.
- A 2008 article in the journal *Obesity* that analyzed findings from 36 different studies of sleep duration and body weight found that lack of sufficient sleep tends to disrupt hormones that control hunger and appetite, and the resulting daytime fatigue often discourages you from exercising. A recent US survey found that the states reporting the most sleep problems—West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama—also have the highest obesity rates.
- A 2009 report found health difficulties in people with persistent insomnia (sleeping less than six hours per night): a threefold increase in the risk of type 2 diabetes, and a three-and-a-half times greater risk of high blood pressure.
- A study of about 1,000 young adults found that, compared with normal sleepers, insomniacs were four times as likely to develop major depression within three years. Sleep problems in the teenagers preceded depression 69% of the time and anxiety disorders 27% of the time.
- A Japanese heart disease study noted a 1.3-fold increase in mortality in sleep-deprived patients compared with those who got sufficient sleep. Severe sleep apnea raises the risk of dying early by 46%. Although only about 8% of the men in the study had severe apnea, those who did and who were between 40 and 70 years of age were twice as likely to die from any cause as healthy men in the same age group.

Teenagers are taking classes earlier and earlier, with buses picking kids up at 5:45 a.m. and classes starting at 6:30 a.m. But is this good for their health? A coalition of Virginia parents, teachers, and administrators says no: adolescents on average need 9¼ hours of sleep per night, but average only 7½ hours of sleep per night (with 25 percent sleeping 6½ hours or less).

Sleep deprivation affects teens' ability to think, perform, and react appropriately and safely, including when driving a car. As parents know, teenagers for some reason naturally become night owls and late risers. Band practice at dawn doesn't help. Since sleep deprivation contributes to depression, and adolescent brains are undergoing dramatic chemical changes, going without sleep to accommodate a school schedule may also set them up for a dangerous SSRI prescription.

How much sleep do the rest of us need? According to the National Sleep Foundation, adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep each night, keeping in mind that individual needs vary and it is important to listen to your body. Similar recommendations come from mainstream and integrative medical experts.

Here are a few vital tips for improving your sleep:

- A healthy diet and vigorous exercise help tremendously in allowing your body to fall asleep naturally.
- Get regular exposure to daylight for at least 20 minutes daily — the light from the sun enters your eyes and triggers your brain to secrete and then release specific chemicals and hormones like melatonin that are vital to healthy sleep.
- Honor the natural circadian rhythm—sleep when it's dark, wake when it's light. Studies suggest that this will make a tremendous contribution to overall health. It's not really surprising. Our bodies evolved with sunlight, not electrical lights.
- Don't use artificial light in the evening after going to bed—it shuts down melatonin release. Any sort of light can suppress melatonin release, but recent experiments have pointed the finger at one type in particular: the blue wavelengths produced by many kinds of energy-efficient light bulbs and electronic gadgets. Computer monitors, cell phones, and LED television screens are especially bad. Special glasses to remove blue light will help protect you if you must turn on lights after going to bed. A special nightlight with a red wavelength can make all the difference if you need a nightlight. (None of this should be surprising. Blue light is the light of dawn. No wonder your body is confused when your computer flashes blue lights in the wee hours of the night! And those people who, unable to sleep, get up and turn on their cell phone or computer or iPad are doing the worst thing they possibly can. Maybe we all need to learn to count sheep again.)
- Avoid both alcohol and caffeine 4 to 6 hours before bedtime.
- Make the room you're sleeping in as dark and quiet as possible. A cool (though not cold) room is often the most sleep-inducing. If you can't get away from noise, install some white noise from

an air cleaner or similar source. This will cover the other noise and not interfere with sleep. When traveling, you can use some soft ear plugs made by Flynt.

- Dr. Mehmet Oz recommends melatonin if you are having trouble going to sleep, but notes that the commonly listed dosage (five milligrams) is more than what most people require; instead, he recommends starting with one milligram and work up to 2.5 milligrams if necessary. Up to 5 or 6 milligrams might be needed on special occasions, such as when you are jet lagged. Melatonin (taken at your new bedtime at the travel destination) is by far the best cure for jet lag.
- It is not surprising that melatonin is such an effective supplement. It is the same substance that our bodies use to put us to sleep. It is also a highly important antioxidant and a vital part of our immune system. No wonder our immune systems do so much of their work at night when we are asleep! One word of caution however: a small minority of melatonin supplement users report that it gives them overly vivid dreams. In the unlikely event that you experience this, you can simply discontinue use.
- Dr. Hyman also mentions melatonin, and recommends trying supplements like 320 mg to 480 mg of valerian one hour before bedtime; 200 to 400 mg of magnesium citrate or glycinate before bed to calm the nervous system and muscles; as well as theanine (an amino acid from green tea), GABA, magnolia, and 5-HTP. Other authorities mention passionflower for its calming effects. Passionflower can also be used during the day. 5-HTP is a close relative of the amino acid tryptophan, which the body needs to make serotonin. When anti-depression drugs (which inhibit the break down of serotonin) first appeared, the FDA banned tryptophan as a supplement, using one contaminated batch as the excuse. Tryptophan is now once again available as a supplement, although at a much higher price than before. It should be taken at night, preferably with a bite of food, such as a few walnuts and a bit of fruit, which will help you make use of the tryptophan.
- GABA in particular is the natural hormone that calms us down from an over-anxious state, but many GABA supplements either don't seem to get through the stomach or else fail to work effectively for some other reason. Pharma GABA by Thorne is effective, although some other brands may work as well.

In general, though, the key to getting a good night's sleep isn't supplements. It is sleeping while it is dark and avoiding light, especially blue light, once you have gone to bed.