

- Sleep

Sleep is something we all need but many of us don't get enough of with four in 10 Australians experiencing inadequate sleep. Seven to 9 hours of sleep in a 24-hour period is optimal, says Dr Alex Wolkow, Research Fellow, School of Psychological Sciences, Monash University and board member at the Sleep Health Foundation. "Sleep duration does vary a lot from one individual to the next and for younger people, the sleep need is greater, so it can vary quite a lot over the lifespan as well," he says.

According to the Sleep Health Foundation, sleep requirements vary the most for babies, children and teens before stabilising in early adult life, around the age of 20. And it's not just the duration but also the quality of the sleep that you're getting that's important. Some well-known people famed for their need for little sleep including Barack Obama, Julia Gillard, Elon Musk, Richard Branson and Donald Trump, surviving on as little as 3-6 hours a night. So is it possible that some people simply don't need the recommended 7-9 hours a night? Or just choose to live by Jon Bon Jovi's mantra: "Gonna live while I'm alive, I'll sleep when I'm dead"?

'SHORT SLEEPERS'

Yes and no. According to the Sleep Health Foundation, a natural short sleeper is a person who sleeps less than six hours per night, even when they have more available time to sleep. Natural short sleepers differ from people who sleep less than six hours because of a lack of time in their schedule for sleep or a condition, such as insomnia.

"There are people that have a short natural sleep (or they think they have a short natural sleep time), and then there are other people who get five or six hours, but struggle to get more than that," explains Associate Professor Angela Campbell, WellSleep Centre, University of Otago, Wellington.

"People suffering with insomnia may find it difficult to get off to sleep or to maintain sleep so their total sleep time is reduced, and are likely to feel dissatisfied and not refreshed when they wake," she says. "While short sleepers might think that they function fine, the long-term data shows that their long-term health is still negatively impacted by being a short sleeper."

Dr Wolkow says: "One of the best indicators of your own sleep need is assessing the quality of your wake time. If you find that you're feeling like the quality of your wake time is impaired, such as you're excessively sleepy at certain times during the day, then it is possible you are not getting an adequate quantity and/or quality of sleep."

Most of us have felt the immediate effects of a late night or a poor night's sleep, feeling groggy, grumpy and reaching for sugar and



MAKE SLEEP YOUR SUPER POWER

Are you overdoing the caffeine and junk food, finding it hard to concentrate during the day and feeling unreasonably cranky? It might be time to look closely at your sleep habits.

WORDS BY JANET STONE

caffeine to get us through the day. Sleep is as important to good health as nutrition and exercise, but it's not always prioritised as highly. "We often think of diet and physical activity as the pillars of health, but I think we really should elevate sleep as a third pillar. Because it's just as important and interacts with those other pillars as well," says Dr Wolkow. "One of the major effects of insufficient sleep is sleepiness and that can impact both our mind and our body. Sleep loss and related sleepiness can impact how we make decisions. It can also impact our memory, concentration levels, and affect how likely we are to become angry or irritable."

IMPACT OF SLEEP DEPRIVATION

A number of studies have demonstrated being tired from lack of sleep can affect us in a similar way to having heightened blood alcohol levels. Research by Williamson and

Feyer found that moderate sleep deprivation impairs cognitive function and physical coordination in the same way as being intoxicated: "The fatigue of sleep deprivation is an important factor likely to compromise performance of speed and accuracy of the kind needed for safety on the road and in other industrial settings."

"Consequences of not getting enough good quality and/or quantity of sleep on our performance can include impairments to our coordination, reaction times and how alert we feel – these things can increase our risk of errors," says Dr Wolkow.

Lack of enough or quality sleep over longer periods of time has also been proven to adversely impact our mental and physical health. "In terms of mental health, we know adequate sleep is really important. It can reduce our risk of a range of mental health issues," says Dr Wolkow.



Longitudinal research by Dr Wolkow and his colleagues published in March 2023 found that poor sleep at the beginning of a career that involves shift work which is stressful and demanding in nature (in this case paramedics), was a significant risk factor for the development of increased depression and PTSD symptoms later into their career.

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

“There is increasing evidence to show that if sleep is inadequate, it can be a risk factor for a range of physical health problems, such as cardiovascular disease risk factors, obesity and diabetes,” says Dr Wolkow. “We know that good sleep is really important for regulating hormone levels that control how hungry and full we feel, and also impact blood glucose levels that are important for diabetes risk.”

There are many things to consider when trying to prioritise and maximise your sleep quality and quantity. “The most important thing is to prioritise an adequate opportunity for sleep, which often involves planning ahead and carving out time to sleep that gives you the best opportunity to get the quantity of sleep that you need,” suggests Dr Wolkow.

Professor Campbell says mentally switching off and having a dedicated period to wind down before going to bed is key, yet is often overlooked. “People are often active on their devices scrolling through social media, or playing games before bed rather than doing something like reading or listening to music,” she says. “Finding something that helps you unwind and relax is really important. Something that allows your mind to not be focused on all the things that have happened during the day, perhaps even practising a relaxation or mindfulness technique.”

HEALTH | SLEEP

SIGNS THAT YOU ARE GETTING LOW-QUALITY SLEEP INCLUDE:

- You take more than 30 minutes to fall asleep after you get into bed.
- You regularly wake up more than once a night.
- You lie awake for more than 20 minutes when you wake up.
- You spend less than 85 per cent of your time in bed asleep.
- You feel tired and have difficulty concentrating during the day. You may be drinking more caffeine to stay alert.
- Your skin is breaking out and your eyes are puffy, red, or developing dark circles or bags.
- You feel hungry more often, especially for junk food, and are gaining weight.
- You feel more stressed out, emotionally exhausted, and angrier than usual.

Going to bed and waking at the same time each day is recommended to help regulate circadian rhythms that are linked to your internal ‘body clock’ in your brain. Your circadian rhythm is your sleep-wake cycle in a 24-hour period. Light is one of the main factors that regulates our sleep cycle. “One of the key regulators of our circadian rhythm is light. We have little receptors in our eye that detect light and those receptors feed directly to the brain to tell us it’s time to be awake and alert,” says Professor Campbell.

Disrupting your circadian rhythm can disrupt your sleep. Ever wondered why, if you sleep in on Sunday morning, you struggle to get to sleep that night? It’s the same reason your sleep may be unsettled after you travel long haul until your body settles into a new sleep-wake cycle at your new location. “Get outside at lunchtime and have a walk to get some exercise and some bright light in the sunshine and try to be as regular as you can with your sleep time and your wake-up time,” recommends Professor Campbell.

Avoiding caffeine close to bedtime is also recommended as well as having a quiet and dark sleep environment, says Dr Wolkow. “You want to aim for a room temperature between 18 and 21 degrees, any warmer or cooler than that may impact sleep,” he says.

“Awareness around the importance of sleep health is improving, but we still have work to do,” says Dr Wolkow. “If we keep trying to raise the profile of sleep, that will lead to greater awareness, which in turn will help people take sleep more seriously and prioritise it.”