- Sleep

POWERING UP OR WINDING DOWN?

When the post-lunch 'dip' hits, is it better to give in to the urge to put our head down for a nap, or should we soldier on to the end of the day in order to sleep better at night? The answer is not straightforward. It all depends on the type of nap you take, how long you sleep and your own body clock.

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Whether we lack sleep, feel tired, or simply need to escape the overwhelm of our current reality, a nap always feels like a good idea. Napping has been associated with resting the system, improving alertness and increasing motor function. It has been documented to boost attention, productivity, improve people's ability to learn and feel well-rested.

In some Mediterranean cultures, a mid-day snooze is part of their daily life. In some countries, companies dim the lights at lunchtime and encourage napping in the offices. In Japan, employees do *inemuri* or workplace napping to recharge for the rest of the day. They have even developed high-tech sleeping pods and napping pillows designed for employees who sleep face down on their work desks.

Dr Moira Junge, CEO of the Sleep Health Foundation says in Australia and New Zealand, we've never been encouraged to have naps, except in pre-school and nana naps in retirement and old age. And yet 37% of Kiwis get fewer than seven hours sleep a night.

THREE TYPES OF NAPS

There are different types of naps. Dr Gorica Micic, a clinical psychologist from Flinders Health and Medical Research Institute has a background in research and clinical work with a focus on sleep and sleep disorders. She treats and manages insomnia and often body clock disorders.

"First, there are replacement naps, if you've had very little sleep for whatever reason, whether that's because of insomnia, shift work, or other things. When we did not have a good night of sleep, we might use it as a strategy to replace some of the sleep that we've not had at night.

"Second, we have what are called prophylactic naps, which are really more purposeful. If you know you have shiftwork coming up and you won't be sleeping the following night, you engage in those prophylactic naps.

"The third type is called appetitive napping, where people might just sleep because they are habitual sleepers."

Dr Micic suggests understanding the two main processes that govern our ability to be awake and be asleep at night.

SLEEP 'PRESSURE'

The first is called sleep pressure. She explains, "Essentially, it is the time spent awake. The longer that we're awake, the sleepier that we get, and the longer that we sleep, the more restorative we become. Once we're asleep, the sleep pressure comes down gradually during the sleep period. Think of it as the hunger or thirst drive. The longer you go without foods, the hungrier you get. The longer you go without water, the thirstier you get. But then once you have water or food, that need for those essentials pretty much decreases. We have that same process with sleep."

The second process is our body clock. During the day, the body clock allows us to wake up, and during the night, the body clock facilitates our ability to sleep. In terms of the sleep pressure, during the day that sleep pressure builds up, what happens during a nap is that the sleep pressure starts to decline.

To understand sleep pressure and the body clock, we must consider the length of a nap and its impact on how much sleep pressure is actually being used up. Dr Micic says, "For example, if you take a four-hour nap, it's going to bring down that sleep pressure." She likens it to having a hunger drive, saying, "A snack or a large meal is going to diminish your appetite or your ability to eat a meal after because you've had it. Napping can be useful if you know you won't be able to go to bed, because of your work and things like that. But for people who are insomniac, we advise them not to nap. Because, napping is going to use up that sleep pressure during the day, which is actually going to make it even harder for them to fall asleep at night. Compensating for lost sleep during the day then derails their ability to sleep the following night."

There is no clear-cut answer as to whether naps are good or bad. It depends on the reason for the nap, the timing and duration. If it's kept short and kept at the right time, naps can generally be beneficial, especially because we know so many people have inadequate sleep. Naps can take the edge of that sleepiness.

If anyone is having a problem with sleep, it is important to speak with their GP. Most cities have sleep disorder centres, where you can consult with a sleep doctor through a referral from your GP. But the vast majority of people simply need to prioritise sleep.

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THE BLUE ZONE NAP

In today's world, where productivity often takes precedence over rest, the concept of a midday nap might seem foreign. However, in the Blue Zones – the regions where people live remarkably longer and healthier lives – the nap is commonplace. Blue Zones encompass regions such as Okinawa (Japan), Sardinia (Italy), Ikaria (Greece), Nicoya Peninsula (Costa Rica), and Loma Linda (California). What sets these areas apart is not just the remarkable lifespan of their inhabitants, but also their exceptional quality of life. One common denominator among these diverse cultures is the practice of taking midday nap. Residents of Ikaria, an island in the Aegean Sea known for its high number of centenarians, often take afternoon naps, referred to as 'mesimeri', to combat the heat of the day and rejuvenate themselves. The concept of 'riposo', or rest, is deeply ingrained in Sardinian culture, encouraging individuals to take breaks and recharge during the day. In Nicoya, where a significant number of people live to be over 100, the tradition of an afternoon siesta is common.

Studies of these regions have shown that napping can enhance cognitive function, memory consolidation, and creativity and a brief siesta can alleviate stress, improve mood, and bolster emotional resilience. Napping has been linked to reduced risk of cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, and overall mortality in the context of Blue Zones.

Five Ways To Get The Most Out Of Napping

1. KEEP YOUR NAPS SHORT

Each sleep cycle is about 90 to 120 minutes long. In a typical night, we go through about five of those sleep cycles. A short 10-minute nap is going to stay in very light sleep. It means that we're not using up much of that sleep pressure. If we sleep longer, for example, 40 minutes to 60 minutes, we're going to hit the very deep stage of sleep. That takes out a lot of that sleep pressure that we built during the day.

2. TIME YOUR NAPS

Time your naps to be about 10 to 15 minutes, maximum 20 minutes, so they do not feed into our sleep pressure at night. With longer naps, we hit deep sleep and wake up feeling groggy. When we wake up out of lighter stages of sleep, we don't get that grogginess. Longer naps also result in being alert longer into the night, where we might not be able to fall asleep. Short naps of 10 to 15 minutes will make us feel instantly alert. Because of that short duration, we tend to not feel the benefits of alertness for very long, allowing us to sleep at night.

3. WHEN TO TAKE A NAP?

Time it around midday, somewhere around 12 and 2pm, and no later than that. Dr Micic explains that our body clock regulates the timing of sleep. Our body clock goes into a very deep descent for sleep at night. During the day, our body clock keeps us awake.

But we have what we call this 'post-lunch dip.' We tend to experience a little bit of a dip in our alertness naturally. It's got nothing to do with actually having lunch or not having lunch. When you think about siesta cultures, often the time they nap is around that time because physiologically there is this propensity to want to nap around that time.

Dr Junge explains, "Napping around lunch time also keeps it well away from the night's sleep. But if you're on the roads driving and you feel a bit sleepy, don't wait a second longer. Pull over when you can and have a short nap."

4. DRINK COFFEE BEFORE YOU NAP

Dr Micic suggests setting your timer for 20 minutes of sleep and drinking a cup of coffee before your nap. It takes half an hour for caffeine to kick in. If you have a cup of coffee before your nap, sleep for 20 minutes, you're going to wake up refreshed from the nap. Plus, the benefit of the caffeine having metabolised in your body is going to pick you up and make you feel more alert.