Do women need more sleep than men? Science says they do

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Sleep is often seen as a universal human need. But research suggests that women not only sleep differently from men but also need more of it.



DW spoke with women in various regions of the world, who all shared stories of needing more rest than they were getting and told us of the toll of what's known as "sleep debt."

Take Sana Akhand, for example: Akhand headed a human resources department in New York's tech industry when she hit a wall of exhaustion, realized it was affecting her mental health and felt forced to leave the job.

"I used to pour myself a glass of wine and crash in front of the TV every night," she told DW. "I was drained. I had nothing more to give."

These days, sleep is central to Akhand's sense of well-being. It's one reason why she chose not to have children. She's in bed by 10 p.m. and sleeps nine hours a night - it's nonnegotiable, she said. "I wake up around 8 a.m. That's what my body wants."

What science says about biological sex and sleep

On average, women sleep 11 to 13 minutes longer than men each night. Some studies suggest they may require up to 20 extra minutes to support complex daytime functions, like multitasking, emotional regulation or hormonal balance and the menstrual cycle.

During the first half of the menstrual cycle, the follicular phase, rising estrogen levels improve sleep quality and increase REM sleep, the stage that is linked to dreaming, memory and emotional processing.

But during the second half of the sleep cycle, the luteal phase, rising progesterone levels can make women feel sleepy, and paradoxically, lead to worse sleep - more night wakings and up to 27% less deep sleep.

Shantani Moore, a body intelligence coach in Los Angeles, spoke with DW in a personal capacity and said she planned her daytime schedule around her menstrual cycle and sleep patterns.
"It's something I've consciously worked at," said Moore. "When I don't get enough sleep, it's a toxic marriage between feeling wired and tired. Then there's brain fog, poor decisionmaking, snapping at your partner, saying yes to things you shouldn't... it all adds up."
Sleep, family, work, chores, sleep
Beyond biology, social and structural factors can also affect how - and how well - women sleep.
For Sabrina, who lives in Karachi, Pakistan, and who requested that DW change her name, the demands of daily life were a major source of her exhaustion. Sabrina said she typically only got six to seven hours of sleep a night, and that it was not enough.
"To feel rested, and keep my mind fresh throughout the week, I need 12 hours [of sleep per night]. It's more than the average eight," said Sabrina.
When she doesn't get her 12 hours, Sabrina tries to catch up with short naps, which sometimes stretch into hours. "A 30-minute nap can turn into four hours."
She said it's not just work that tires her out, but also constant mental and domestic labor.
"In the morning, I iron my clothes, prepare breakfast and then lunch, clean the house, and make dinner. And when I'm too exhausted to do it, I start mentally beating myself up. I feel lazy, even if it's just something that takes 10 minutes," Sabrina said
On weekends, when she visits family, she sleeps 12 to 13 hours straight, without interruption.
Experts say this burden is more than anecdotal; it's systemic.
"Women experience shift work disorder more often [than men], and they also work more non-traditional shifts, and suffer more from the negative effects of that," said Emerson Wickwire, a sleep expert at the University of Maryland, US.
"If you take '9 to 5' as a standard workday, this means, relative to men, women work even outside those hours, including societal demands," Wickwire told DW.
Clara Paula, a self-employed professional in Berlin, seems to have found a solution in freelancing. She told DW her flexible hours allowed her to get more sleep whenever she needed it.
"I get seven, eight, even nine hours of sleep now," said Paula. "There's nobody telling me I have to sit in front of the computer. I start later, take breaks, and finish faster."
But it's not only about the hours - the quantity of sleep you get - but also about the quality. Research suggests that women need to sleep deeper because of their physiology.
"By that, we mean more stage N3, the deepest. stage of nonREM sleep, and often more REM sleep as well," said Julio Fernandez-Mendoza, a sleep psychologist and clinical researcher at Penn State Health, US.
Even in tightly controlled lab studies, where healthy men and women are monitored without stress or sleep debt, women consistently sleep longer and deeper.
"That's the foundation for the idea that women may biologically need more sleep," said Fernandez-Mendoza.
This may come down to biological resilience; a protective system observed in other areas of research, such as cardiovascular health and longevity.
"It makes sense that when a body is designed to create life, it has to be protected. A woman has to be able to sleep and function even while carrying another human being," said Fernandez-

Mendoza.

Yet despite this built-in resilience, women report insomnia symptoms twice as often as men.

"That starts as early as puberty," said FernandezMendoza. "Around age 11 or 12 years, girls begin reporting more trouble sleeping than boys, and that trend continues into adulthood."

Does sleeping in on weekends help? Yes, and no.

"Sleeping in can help you feel alert again - you've restored your sleep debt," said Fernandez-Mendoza.

Continued on page 58