- Sleep



6 ways to sleep easy

Words: Louise Pyne

Discover the signs of sleep-induced inflammation and follow our six-point plan to reset your nightly routine

There are the outward signs of poor sleep that we all know – dark, puffy circles, erratic moods, low energy and dwindling concentration levels - but then there are the inflammatory effects that sleep debt is causing havoc with on your insides.

Inflammation is a two-way street when it comes to sleep disturbances, because not only does poor sleep trigger inflammation, inflammation also causes poor sleep. Even if you're relatively able to function on just a few hours' sleep, unless you obtain those quality eight hours on a regular basis, your health may suffer.

How common are problems with sleeping?

Sleep problems are very common in the UK, with one in two people confessing that they get less than six hours sleep per night. Interestingly, women are twice as likely to suffer insomnia than men, as a result of having too much on their plates, high anxiety levels and a complicated medley of fluctuating hormones all thrown into the mix.

"Poor sleep, whether due to insufficient duration or poor quality, can lead to chronic low-grade inflammation, increasing the risk of various health issues, including metabolic disorders, cardiovascular disease and autoimmune conditions," explains Dominika Blonska, a hormone health and fitness expert and qualified nurse (*definebydom.com*).

The dangers of missing sleep

During deep sleep, the body releases anti-inflammatory cytokines that help regulate immune responses. A lack of sleep disrupts this balance, increasing pro-inflammatory cytokines that can disrupt immunity, making you more susceptible to illness. Sleep also helps to regulate levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and an inconsistent sleep schedule can result in elevated levels of cortisol.

"Cortisol helps control inflammation and follows a natural daily rhythm. Poor sleep disrupts this cycle, leading to higher baseline inflammation," adds Blonska.

It's a double-edged sword – the more stressed you are, the less you'll sleep, and the fewer hours of sleep you get, the more stressed you feel.

There's more... A lack of restorative sleep, (known as REM sleep) raises oxidative stress and impairs cellular repair mechanisms, contributing to inflammation and tissue damage.

These are all danger traps that you can fall into. Even if you are getting the recommended eight hours of sleep it's paramount to consider how much restorative sleep you are getting, because it's not just about sleep quantity, but also about quality.

Signs you might not be getting enough deep-sleep hours include waking up feeling unrefreshed with brain fog and a grogginess that doesn't lift throughout the day. Recurrent bouts of illness or taking longer to heal than usual is also a warning sign to watch out for as this indicates a weakened immune system. Sleep helps to regulate levels of the appetite hormone ghrelin and the satiety hormone leptin. When this finely tuned balance is out of whack you might suffer from cravings – especially for sugary and high carbohydrate foods. Thankfully there are lots of steps you can take to help improve sleep while minimising any inflammatory effects.

6 micro-habits for *better sleep*

Sleep-proof your routine with these easy to implement tips

1 BE CONSISTENT

Our bodies run off a 24-hour sleep-awake cycle that affects every cell, tissue and organ in the body. Your body naturally knows that you should be sleeping during the night hours and as a consequence, levels of the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin increase to help lull you into a sleepy state.

"Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day (even weekends) helps regulate your circadian rhythm, (and melatonin levels) making it easier to fall asleep and wake up naturally," says Dominika Blonska.

It's important to know that the odd lie-in won't help catch up on built-up sleep debt. It's better to tweak your daily schedule instead of burning the candle at both ends and hoping to make up the hours at the weekend.

2 REDUCE BLUE LIGHT EXPOSURE

Bedtime is the worst time of day to sit scrolling through social media or think about juggling work deadlines. "Blue light from phones, TVs and tablets suppresses melatonin, the sleep hormone. Try using blue light-blocking glasses or avoiding screens at least 60 minutes before bed," says Blonska. Better still, set a no-phone in the bedroom rule so you're not tempted to reach for one when you should be dropping off.





3 RE-THINK YOUR SLEEP HYGIENE

Make an extra effort to structure your evening so that you have some free time before you hit the hay. "Engage in calming activities before bed, such as reading, journalling, stretching, or deep breathing exercises. These all help signal to your body that it's time to wind down," explains Blonska.

A warm candlelit bath with lavender oil can feel heavenly after a long day, and soothing your senses is a great way to lull yourself into a peaceful slumber.

4 AVOID EVENING STIMULANTS

A cup of coffee might be one of the only things that gets you going in the morning, but caffeine-fuelled drinks (not just coffee, but also tea, caffeinated sports drinks and fizzy drinks) can impair nighttime sleep as their effects last for hours after your last sip. "Caffeine can stay in your system for hours, disrupting sleep, so it's best to avoid it at least six hours before bedtime to ensure the effects don't interfere with your sleep cycle," says Blonska.

Switch to decaffeinated tea and coffee and herbal tea varieties such as chamomile and lemon balm, instead of green tea and a builder's brew, for their naturally calming and stress-relieving properties.

5 PRIORITISE MORNING SUNLIGHT EXPOSURE

Make sure that exposing your skin to natural sunlight is one of the first things you do upon waking to help reset your circadian rhythm. Take a leisurely walk around your garden (barefoot if possible to help engage with nature), or relax by a sunlit windowsill for five to ten minutes each morning. "Natural light exposure early in the day helps regulate your body's internal clock and supports melatonin production at night," maintains Blonska. You'll be surprised at the difference it makes.



6 CHANGE YOUR DIET

The micro decisions that you make about what you put into your body can have a profound effect on your sleep. Include more sleep-inducing foods in your daily diet, such as turkey, bananas, oats and dairy products. These are all rich in the neurotransmitter tryptophan, which is needed to create the sleep hormone melatonin. Avoid spicy, fried food at night as this can place a toll on your digestive system, making it harder to fall asleep. It's also a good idea to leave at least two to three hours between your last meal of the day and heading off to bed to avoid any abdominal discomfort.

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