



THE BIG sleep

Five steps to a better night's sleep

BY TARA NOLAN

WHEN WAS THE last time you had a good night's sleep? If you can't remember, then you may be sleep-deprived, like the 58 per cent of Canadians who say they often feel tired. In a recent study by Leger Marketing for CBC News, it was revealed that six out of 10 Canadians get about one hour less shut-eye than the six to eight hours we are told we need.

So, just how bad are our modern sleep habits? "It tends to be worse in more-urban areas," says Dr. James MacFarlane, director of education for MedSleep, a network of sleep clinics throughout

Canada. "As things get more complicated and we get more into a 24-hour society, it tends to take its toll." MacFarlane, who is also on the board of the Canadian Sleep Society, claims that sleep restriction and sleep deprivation are two of the biggest problems in today's society. Numerous studies conducted by the Canadian Sleep Society have linked sleep deprivation to a host of health problems, from heart disease to diabetes. If you're at the point where "catching forty winks" seems like a long-lost luxury, here are some tips to help you sleep at night.

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Create a regular sleep pattern

MacFarlane likens sleep deprivation to the bad habit many of us have when we don't properly shut down our computer. "If you don't reboot your computer ever, it eventually doesn't work properly," he says. On a functional level, sleep deprivation is similar; it builds up over time. But unlike a computer, you can't just press the restart button. It's best to get the same amount of sleep each night, even on weekends. "Whatever you find works for you, it's best to stick to those consistent routines as much as possible," says MacFarlane.

Recognize your sleep needs

Not everyone needs the same amount of sleep to function during the day. Experts maintain we should get anywhere between six and eight hours of sleep a night. MacFarlane explains that some people are fine on six hours of sleep and others are better with nine. The trick is to find what your magic number is, he says. Often when the sleep clinic has a patient fill out a journal, they're instantly able to see where the problem is and correct it themselves.

Disconnect and decompress before bed

The National Sleep Foundation's annual Sleep in America poll recently found that about 61 per cent of Americans use their laptops or computers at least a few nights a week within the hour before bed and many surf the Internet right before going to sleep. This type of overstimulation, not to mention the artificial light these devices emit, can mess with our circadian rhythms. "If you stimulate yourself enough, it will allow you to postpone sleep much more easily," says MacFarlane.

That means counting sheep really is a lot better than counting all the emails you need to catch up on when you have your smartphone beeping beside your ear. "You have to be disconnected to be reconnected the next day," says MacFarlane, who recommends a regular bedtime routine

that is more calming. Sarah O'Connor, a professor from Toronto who has dealt with periods of insomnia, finds that doing ashtanga yoga before bed with a lavender eye pillow, which she also sometimes wears to bed, helps to calm her. Her routine, which also involves reading and making sure everything is ready for her to go to work in the morning, is tailored to her relaxation needs, so make sure to find what's relaxing for you and add that to your daily nighttime routine.

Create your version of comfort in the bedroom

As far as where and how we sleep, MacFarlane says it's completely up to the individual, it just has to be comfortable. For example, some people need complete quiet, while others like the radio on. When Jessica Lewis, a communications assistant at the University of Toronto who suffers from mild sleep apnea, lived in a basement apartment, she felt it interrupted her sleep patterns. "I felt like I was in eternal darkness," she says. Now that she wakes up with the sun—and follows tips to deal with her sleep apnea—she feels her sleep has improved.

Avoid playing catch-up

Staying up really late once the weekend rolls around and then rectifying your lack of shut-eye by sleeping in rarely makes you feel better, says MacFarlane. Plus, it messes up subsequent nights and throws off your schedule. Past studies suggest that one night alone will not erase our sleep debt, and after a recent study revealed groundbreaking findings linking lack of sleep to obesity, researchers plan to delve into this issue further. "One good solid night doesn't make up for two years of deprivation," explains MacFarlane. "You have to get yourself back into a program."

There is no doubt that our hectic lifestyles, addiction to technology and poor sleeping habits may contribute to a chronic lack of sleep. But if you have explored ways to resolve sleep deprivation and you still aren't sleeping well, it's wise to seek the attention of an expert. □

X out these bad habits to catch some **Z**'s.

AVOID CAFFEINE PAST LATE AFTERNOON.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, coffee or tea in the evening can interfere with your REM sleep and leave you feeling more tired. Opt instead for caffeine-free herbal teas if you're in the mood for a hot drink.

LEAVE TECHNOLOGY OUT OF THE BEDROOM.

Try to truly decompress by eliminating the television, video games and portable devices, like cellphones and laptops, in the bedroom.

KEEP NAPS SHORT.

As humans, MacFarlane says we're better suited to have a biphasic sleep, which means a longer sleep during the night followed by a short one during the day. Research has shown if you can restrict your nap to between 20 and 40 minutes, that's ideal, he says.

DO NOT EAT BIG MEALS BEFORE BED.

When you're upright, you have gravity on your side, explains MacFarlane. Going to bed on a full stomach increases your chances of ailments like acid reflux. It can also influence the way you dream and make for a more restless sleep. Conversely, it's not good to go to bed hungry, either, so make sure to eat meals no more than two to three hours before bedtime.

AVOID HEAVY EXERCISE BEFORE YOU SLEEP.

Engaging in a hard cardio workout right before bed can wind you up and prevent you from falling asleep, so avoid late-night exercise if you're having trouble sleeping, says the National Sleep Foundation.