10 Common Sleep Myths That Can Hurt Your Sleep Debunked

There are a lot of sleep myths out there. How many of them have you heard?

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Today we know a great deal about how sleep works, the benefits and protections it delivers for physical, mental, and emotional health, and the problems that occur when we don't get enough. But we're far from knowing everything there is to know on the topic.

Here's why this matters false beliefs or misinformation about sleep can do real harm to your health and well-being. One big part of my mission is to correct the sleep misconceptions out there, so everyone can sleep better and more successfully manage sleep.

So let's take a look at some common sleep myths, and why they are false so they can be put to rest once and for all.

10 Common Sleep Myths Debunked

While some sleep myths are actually true, most have limited or questionable evidence, or are blatantly untrue. This is why it's so important to clear up these misconceptions. Here are 10 common, but untrue, sleep myths that I hear about a lot.

1. It's possible to function well on 5 hours of sleep or less.

So many people want this one to be true—unfortunately, it just isn't.

Between work, school, family, et cetera, everyone leads a busy life. Some people think about sleep as something that stands in the way of productivity, or may even brag about how much they can accomplish on minimal sleep. A good night's sleep shouldn't be considered as an option, a luxury, or an inconvenience. A full night of healthy sleep is key to your health, and missed sleep can have a number of undesirable effects on your productivity, physical and mental health, and your overall well-being.

When you don't get the quality sleep you need, you're more likely to be more overweight, sicker, more forgetful, and less able to learn. Your relationships can also suffer, as poor sleep can make you less loving in relationships and less interested in sex and intimacy. Your risks for diseases like heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and Alzheimer's all go up when you're consistently sleep-

deprived.

To prevent this, the best thing you can do for yourself is to try and get a full night's sleep, meaning 7-9 hours of good sleep per night.

2. More sleep is better.

On the other side of the coin, you have the myth that 9 hours of sleep or more per night is best. This is also untrue.

Hypersomnia, or sleeping too much, can be just as bad for you as insomnia, or not sleeping enough. In fact, sleeping too much is linked to many of the same health problems as not getting enough sleep, including:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Cognitive impairment

If you find that you're consistently sleeping for nine or more hours per night and still don't feel rested in the morning, you are oversleeping and may be suffering from an underlying sleep disorder.

3. Loud snoring is normal.

Everyone snores every once in a while, but loud, frequent snoring is not normal.

Loud snoring is a common symptom of obstructive sleep apnea, a sleep disorder that may be accompanied by serious health risks if left untreated. Loud snoring is only one symptom of obstructive sleep apnea—others include:

- Gasping, choking, snorting sounds during sleep
- Observable episodes of lapses in breathing, most often by sleep partners
- Increased need to urinate during the night
- Headaches, dry mouth, and sore throat in the morning
- Trouble concentrating during the day
- Excessive daytime sleepiness

If you or your sleep partner experience any of these symptoms along with loud snoring, you should consult your doctor or a sleep specialist as soon as possible. Sleep disorders don't go away on their own, and you must seek treatment if you want to sleep better.

Do you snore, but aren't sure if it's because of a sleep disorder? Check out my article on how to stop snoring.

4. Drinking alcohol or consuming cannabis before bedtime helps sleep.

Alcohol and cannabis are the two most commonly used sleep aids in the world. However, both can have negative effects on your sleep, health, and mood when used improperly or in excess.

Despite alcohol's sedative effects, health experts discourage its use as a sleep aid because of how it can negatively impact your sleep quality. Sleep disorders are common with those who depend on alcohol to sleep, and alcohol use has been associated with disorders like insomnia, obstructive sleep apnea, and circadian rhythm abnormalities.

Cannabis, on the other hand, is receiving more research for its benefits on physical health, mental health, and sleep health. However, only certain strains of cannabis may benefit your sleep—Indica strains are most often used to treat sleep problems, while Sativa strains may be used as a stimulant.

Cannabis may also suppress REM sleep, and excessive use of cannabis can reduce its effectiveness. Not only that, but cannabis withdrawal can cause additional sleep issues if you stop using it as a sleep aid.

Just like with any sleep aid or treatment, be sure to consult your doctor before using cannabis.

5. If you have a hard time falling asleep, stay in bed.

If you can't sleep and you've tried tricks like counting sheep or counting backwards from one-hundred by 3's, staying in bed is actually the worst thing you can do. This is because you may unintentionally connect your bed with frustration and sleep loss.

Instead, try getting out of bed and doing something relaxing in low light. The goal is to take your mind off sleep for a few minutes to help encourage quick and easy sleep onset when you return to bed.

A few things you can try include:

- Meditation
- Writing your thoughts in a journal
- Walking slowly and quietly, so you don't disturb anyone else's sleep
- Light stretching

6. Older people need less sleep.

It's a common perception that you need less sleep with age. However, I've written an entire article about how this myth is false.

Sleep needs change as you grow from a child into an adult. That individual need doesn't change significantly as you approach or pass the age of 55. You may get less sleep in middle age or older adulthood, but that doesn't mean you need less sleep.

However, as you get older, sleep problems including disorders like insomnia and sleep apnea, tend to become more frequent. Older adults often experience sleep problems such as:

- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Waking too early each morning
- Unrefreshing or poor quality sleep

What's behind these age-related sleep problems? Your circadian rhythm gradually weakens as you age, which contributes to a less robust and more inconsistent sleep cycle. Older adults may sleep less during the night, and need to nap during the day to get adequate sleep. Other health conditions—as well as medications used to treat them—may also interfere with your sleep health as you grow older

7. You can make up any lost sleep on the weekends.

This is another one that is simply untrue.

Many people build a sleep debt—a growing deficit between the sleep you need and the amount you actually get—during the week. It's a common strategy to use the weekend to make up for this lost sleep. Weekend recovery sleep does help, but it won't fully erase the negative effects of losing sleep during the week. Think about it—if you're sleeping 5.5 hours a night during the workweek and you really need 7 hours, by Friday you're short an entire night of sleep.

Even if you catch up on lost sleep over the weekend, it still won't completely restore attention, focus, and other measurements of cognitive performance. Think of it like working out. If you don't workout for a month, doing a weekend workout, while beneficial, doesn't erase the loss of the benefit exercise over time. With sleep, like exercise, consistency of effort is key.

If you're trying to reduce sleep debt, some recovery sleep on weekends can help. Use weekend catch-up sleep in moderation, staying within 60 minutes of your regular bedtime and wake time so you don't throw off your normal sleep schedule.

The most important thing to remember is to try and get your required sleep during the week so that you don't need to make it up at all.

8. Turkey and warm milk will make you sleepy.

This is an interesting myth because while parts of it are based in fact, it's still not 100 percent true.

Let me be clear though—turkey won't make you sleepy, and neither will a glass of warm milk. The

amino acid tryptophan is cited as the reason for these foods' alleged sleep-inducing powers. Tryptophan plays a vital role in sleep—it helps the brain to produce more serotonin and melatonin, two hormones that are key to healthy and sound sleep.

However, the tryptophan you ingest in a serving of Thanksgiving turkey or a steaming cup of hot milk doesn't act as a sedative because you are not getting enough of the tryptophan to have a notable effect on your sleep.

Tryptophan-rich foods do have an important place in a sleep-supporting diet though. Turkey is only one type of tryptophan-rich meat—

red meat, other poultry, and fish are also rich in tryptophan. And milk certainly isn't the only dairy product that's high in tryptophan—

cheese and yogurt are also. Nuts and seeds, dark greens, and eggs are also great sources of dietary tryptophan.

9. Hitting the snooze button helps you sleep.

If you didn't sleep well during the night, the last thing you want to do is keep hitting the snooze button in the morning.

Any extra sleep you get in between alarms is fragmented and poor quality— you need deep sleep to feel rested in the morning, and you just can't get that from hitting the snooze button in the morning. Not to mention, lingering in bed for too long can lengthen sleep inertia, or that feeling when you feel drowsy, sluggish, and just want to go back to sleep in the morning.

Instead, it's important to rise with your morning alarm— whether you feel rested or not—so you can reduce sleep inertia and be more ready to take on your day.

10. Long naps are best for sleep.

A good nap can help you perk up if you feel yourself lagging during the afternoon. However, it's important not to nap for too long. A short nap can help you feel more alert and less stressed afterwards, but emphasis on the short part. The goal of the nap should be to restore energy and focus for the rest of the day. When I nap, I use Napjitsu along with a 30 minute napping session.

Napping for too long or too late in the day can throw off your sleep schedule, making it harder for you to fall asleep at your normal bedtime. Not to mention, waking up after a long nap can make you feel disoriented and hazy, which is the opposite of how you should feel after a nap!

Don't Lose Sleep Over These Myths

We know much more about sleep now than we did even a few years ago. But despite all this new knowledge and what we still continue to learn, misunderstandings still exist. Misunderstandings about how sleep works are more than just "oops" moments though—they can hinder your ability to get your best, most refreshing and restorative sleep. At worst, they can do real harm.

However, it’s always possible to correct and learn from misunderstandings so that you don’t repeat the same mistakes in the future. I hope that I’ve cleared up these sleep myths for you so that you can get the deep sleep you need to feel your best each day.

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