Why a Regular Sleep Schedule Matters to Your Health

Getting a good night's sleep is one of the best measures you can take to keep your body and immune system running on all cylinders.

March 23, 2020 By Michael Breus, PhD

It's been a week that's felt more like a month — or maybe even a year for some of us. The coronavirus outbreak has, at least temporarily, upended many of our day to day lives and wiped away many of the daily routines we're so used to.

Working out at the gym, going to a great restaurant, and seeing your favorite band or basketball team in action… for many of us, it's all on pause. Right now, while we continue to collectively grapple with the fallout from COVID-19, there are a number of things that are out of our control. Making sure we continue to get quality sleep, however, isn't one of them.

In reality, getting a good night's sleep is one of the best measures you can take to keep your body and immune system running on all cylinders.

This is something we touched on recently in our post on sleep's influence on immunity. Research has shown, you might remember, that people who sleep 6 hours or less each night are 4.2 times more likely to catch the common cold than those who sleep 8 hours a night. That alone shows how important sleep is in keeping ourselves healthy. (To help me get to sleep faster recently, I've been enjoying Jigsaw Magsoothe lemonade packets before bed, which help relax my muscles and support better sleep.)

But it's not just about sleep duration. Sticking to a consistent sleep schedule is just as important when it comes to maintaining our health.

With so much uncertainty currently, I know keeping any kind of schedule is hard. You might be still adjusting to working from home, or trying to find a way to help your kids keep up with their schoolwork while not going to school. It's a major challenge.

Still, if you can find a way to keep a regular sleep schedule, it can pay major dividends for your health — especially when it comes to your heart. With enough to worry about right now, the last thing you need is to increase your risk of running into cardiovascular problems.

Consistent Sleep Is Good for Your Heart

Simply put, an irregular bedtime routine doesn't do your heart any favors.

If you have a habit of falling asleep early one night, going to bed at 3:00 a.m. the next night, only to fall asleep again at midnight the night after, you're putting yourself at a higher risk of heart attack and heart disease. Research from Harvard University last year drove this point home.

The study followed more than 2,000 adults for six years, and focused on their regular sleep time. A regular sleep time was defined as falling asleep within the same 30 minute window on average. For example, if you fell asleep at 11:00 p.m. one night and 11:27 p.m. the next night, you were still within the parameters of your regular sleep time. But straying far from your regular sleep schedule, the researchers found, wasn't great for your health. Participants with the most irregular sleep schedule, where there was a 90 minute gap on average between their regular sleep times over the course of a week, doubled their risk of cardiovascular disease within the next five years.

The study also found inconsistent sleep durations contributed to heart problems. For every one-hour change in how long someone sleeps from night to night, there was a 27% higher chance of developing metabolic syndrome, which is a group of conditions that increase your risk of heart disease.

Metabolic syndrome was also a concern for participants whose bedtime changed dramatically. If your bedtime varied between 60 to 90 minutes on average, you have a 14% greater chance of developing metabolic syndrome; when your bedtime varies by 90 minutes or more, your risk is 58% of developing metabolic syndrome.

Shift workers, smokers and participants who suffered from depression tended to have greater odds of reporting an irregular sleep schedule, the study found.

Inconsistent bedtimes also increases the risk of the following health issues:

- Obesity
- High blood pressure, or hypertension
- Diabetes
- Stroke

The key takeaway is probably clear by now: keep your sleep routine as consistent as possible. That goes for the weekend, too.

How to Improve Your Sleep Routine

Making sure you get to bed around the same time each night is easier with a good bedtime routine.

With that in mind, here are a few simple steps to take when it comes to getting ready for bed.

Know Your Chronotype: The heart and body depend on a strong circadian rhythm to operate at their peak. This is the 24-hour clock that's running in the background while you go about your day. But not every person's biological clock keeps the same time or runs at the same pace. That's why it's so critical to know your chronotype, which helps you determine the best time to do a number of things, including when to rest, eat, exercise and even be intimate with your significant other. Finding out your chronotype, which you can do by taking our easy quiz, gives you a great foundation for deciding when you should hit the hay.

Avoid Caffeine and Alcohol: This one is probably obvious to you, but avoid stimulants like caffeine within a few hours of when you want to go to bed. Alcohol is often used as a sleep aid, too, but it's actually not helpful and instead interferes with normal circadian functioning. You can read more about how alcohol impacts your sleep here.

Watch the Temperature: Keeping it cool is the best way to go at night. We're able to reach REM sleep faster — which helps our bodies recover quicker during the night — by lowering our body temperature before bed. Research indicates setting your room temperature to 60-67 degrees Fahrenheit is optimal for quality sleep. Another way I regulate my body temperature at night is by wearing Cool Jams, which utilize moisture-wicking technology and lightweight fabric to keep me from overheating — and I recommend my readers try them out, too!

Relax: This is imperative. Before bed, you want to limit your phone usage — which radiates blue light and impacts our sleep quality — for at least an hour, avoid work emails, and take a warm shower or bath if you can. And yes, I know you're probably saying right now "why would I take a warm bath when you told me to stay cool at night?" But ironically, a warm bath helps cool down the body by improving blood circulation. Reading a book, rather than watching a show, is always a good move before falling asleep, too.

There you have it, everyone. During this COVID-19 outbreak, do whatever you can to stick to a consistent sleep schedule. This will help reduce your odds of running into other major health issues, like heart disease and diabetes, while you practice social distancing. Stay safe and we'll talk more sleep next week.

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