What Is a Sleep Deficit?

Most American adults don't get as much sleep as they need each night, which can really add up.

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We've all had nights where we just don't get a lot of sleep— it's normal for it to happen occasionally— and we tell ourselves "I'll catch up on my sleep this weekend."

Unfortunately, it's not that simple and a lot of people keep feeling awful day after day as their sleep deficit continues to grow. This not only keeps you feeling tired, but it can also potentially ruin your health and put you at risk of accidents or other health conditions.

So let's take a look at what a sleep deficit is, and how you can take steps to avoid one or recover from one.

What Is a Sleep Deficit?

Sleep deficit, also known as sleep debt, is the difference between the amount of sleep a person needs per night versus the amount they actually get. For example, if you need seven hours of sleep each night, but you only sleep five, then you have a two-hour sleep deficit.

A sleep deficit may leave you feeling tired, but many times you may not even feel tired even though you slept less than needed. This happens because some people's brains are able to adapt to chronic sleep restrictions, and therefore they don't feel sleepy, even though their bodies show significant signs of sleep deprivation.

Looking back at the example above, it can seem like your sleep debt is transactional and you can just put back in what you take out. However, it's very important that you don't think about sleep like a bank account; you can't overdraw the account and then pay it back later.

What Causes Sleep Deficit?

Insufficient sleep is a common cause of a person's sleep deficit, which may be caused by challenges such as:

- Short Sleep Duration
- Sleep disorders including insomnia and obstructive sleep apnea (OSA)
- Other health conditions, including Restless Legs Syndrome or Acid Reflux

- Poor sleep quality- from too much alcohol or caffeine

Common activities can contribute to sleep debt as well, including long work or commute hours that cut into sleep time, socializing, or using electronic devices at night. This has become so common that it actually has a name: Revenge Bedtime Procrastination, which is when people sacrifice sleep for some extra leisure time.

If you have a sleep deficit, then you may be experiencing unpleasant side effects like brain fog or daytime sleepiness. Needless to say, these can make getting through the next day a chore. To avoid a sleep deficit, getting enough restful REM sleep, along with periods of deep sleep, is vital for a healthy body and mind. Not only does sleep deprivation make you feel tired and sluggish during the day, but it can actually be dangerous.

The Dangers of Sleep Deprivation

Sleep deprivation can add up quickly— even moderate sleep deprivation can affect the brain in surprising ways. In fact, one study had subjects go 17-19 hours without sleep, while others drank enough alcohol to reach a blood-alcohol level (BAC) of .05 percent.

The sleep-deprived subjects' performance on some tests was equal to or worse than those who had been consuming alcohol. And it only got worse during additional periods without sleep. The idea that sleep deprivation can impair you as much as being legally drunk may seem like a scary thought, but it's true.

Chronic sleep deprivation puts you at a greater risk of accidents and injury, and can cause cognitive issues. This can include reduced alertness and focus, as well as a decline in your mental health. Having a chronic sleep debt is a very real issue that you need to be aware of to stay healthy and safe.

Can You Catch Up On Lost Sleep?

Unfortunately, you can't just "pay off" your sleep debt by sleeping in on the weekend. Once you have a sleep deficit, it can stick around for a long time. Prevention is better than the cure here. You can avoid sleep debt by creating and following healthy sleep habits, as well as getting the proper amount of sleep each night.

And if needed, you can "bank" some extra sleep in anticipation of a sleepless night, but this only actually works if you are sleep deprived to begin with, if you are getting good quality sleep then it will be almost impossible to "bank "it. For example, you can use your weekends to prepare for the work week, rather than using those days to recover from it.

Tips for Avoiding Sleep Debt or Recovering From Lost Sleep

These positive lifestyle choices can make a huge difference in not only your sleep quality, but also in balancing your sleep debt and helping you sleep better down the line.

1. Follow A Consistent Sleep Schedule

I talk about this a lot, but I think that just goes to show how important consistency is to our sleep. Going to bed at the same time at night and waking up at the same time each morning may seem like a no-brainer, but it really is instrumental to making sure you get better sleep.

It's not always easy getting yourself into a set sleep schedule, but I think you'll find it does wonders for your rest. This is because you're essentially training your body to be ready for sleep and waking at your ideal times. But what if you don't know your ideal sleep-wake schedule?

If you need help finding your ideal sleep schedule, I recommend using my sleep calculator. You can also find your ideal sleep schedule by finding your chronotype, which is how your body's natural clock works with your circadian rhythm.

2. Practice Good Sleep Hygiene

Your sleep hygiene plays a huge role in your sleep quality as well. Good sleep hygiene includes making sure your bedroom is an ideal sleep environment, and having a period of winding down and preparing yourself for sleep.

In fact, a healthy pre-bedtime routine is just as important to your rest as a consistent sleep schedule. So if you have nights where you can't sleep, consider these suggestions for improved sleep hygiene.

- Don't eat too soon before bed. If you stop eating a few hours before bed (2), that gives your body plenty of time to work and digest your food, preventing it from keeping you awake as you're trying to sleep.
- Avoid caffeine at least 8 hours before bed, and alcohol at least a few hours before too.
- Stop using all electronic devices at least 60-90 minutes before bed to encourage melatonin production, or use blue light blocking glasses. Just make sure they have amber lenses!

3. Track Your Sleep Habits in a Sleep Diary

This is similar to keeping a sleep journal, but not exactly the same. In a sleep journal you keep track of your thoughts and feelings— here, you want to keep track of your sleep habits. This includes factors including:

- Your bedtime and wake times
- Your estimated sleep latency, or how long it takes for you to fall asleep
- Any sleep interruptions or nighttime disturbances that occur, and how long they last
- An estimate of your sleep quality

Keeping track of your sleep habits helps you spot any negative patterns that may be sabotaging your rest and contributing to your sleep debt. It may take a little time to get into the habit, but it can really make a huge difference in your sleep quality. If you are more technology inclined, you may want to use a sleep tracker like the Oura ring for additional information.

4. Take a Nap

A quick nap won't clear your sleep deficit, but it can help you feel more rested during the day. Whether you take a longer nap— between 60 and 90 minutes— or a 20-30 minute "power nap," there are a lot of benefits to afternoon naps. Some benefits include:

- Reduced stress
- Increased alertness
- A stronger immune system

Be sure to nap at the right time though— napping too late in the day can cut into your sleep schedule and make getting a good night's sleep harder! So for anyone with problems falling or staying asleep, napping is not a good idea. The best time to take a nap each day is between 1:00 and 3:00 pm, when melatonin levels rise and body temperature drops. This works with your body's circadian rhythm and follows your body's natural cues for sleep. If you know your chronotype, you can refine this timing even more.

Eliminating your sleep deficit isn't easy, but some easy lifestyle changes can make a huge difference in your sleep quality. Even with positive changes though, some people may still need a little help getting the good night's sleep they deserve.

When to Get Help

If you've made positive lifestyle changes and you're still experiencing poor sleep, then it's a sign that you may have a sleep disorder. Sleep disorders such as insomnia or obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) can be huge contributors to your sleep deficit, and it's difficult to get past them without some extra help.

If you think you may have an underlying sleep disorder, be sure to reach out to your doctor or a sleep specialist. They can help you with testing and with finding your treatment options if you are diagnosed with a sleep disorder.

If you're not sure where to find sleep experts or certified sleep centers in your area, check out this tool by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

Sleep deficits are common because as a whole, American adults just don't get enough sleep. Once you have a sleep deficit, it can be tricky to reset. But it is possible to feel rested again. Just be patient and give your new routine time to work, and yourself time to recover.

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