

HEALTH & FITNESS ISSUE



Sweet Dreams

Turning off technology might be the solution for sleep



Getting the perfect night's sleep doesn't have to be a dream. Sometimes, it's as simple as turning off your television or cell phone.

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Want to get more sleep? Tune out the technology.

That's right — turn off your smart phone, power down the computer and skip the sensationalist news programs. Technology is one of the biggest barriers to a full night's rest.

The bright lights inhibit melatonin secretion, which tells your body that it's time to sleep. Late-night activities that actively engage the mind, like checking e-mail, playing video games, text messaging and watching television, also make it difficult to relax and transition

into sleep mode. Plus, it's easy to lose track of time and stay up later than you intended.

"Anthropologists tell us that 5,000 years ago, the average night sleep was 11 to 12 hours a night. When the sun went down, it was dark, boring and dangerous outside, so people went to bed," said Jacob Teitelbaum, medical director of the national Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers Inc., and author of "From Fatigued to Fantastic!" (\$16, Avery).

"The use of candles initially shortened our sleep time. Then light bulbs were developed, followed by radio, TV and computers. We are now down to an average of 6 1/2 to 7 hours of sleep a night, and this is simply not adequate to allow proper tissue repair," he said.

They don't call it "beauty rest" for nothing. Deep sleep stimulates the "fountain of youth" growth hormones and regulates appetite hormones, leaving you thinner and younger looking.

Just one or two nights of poor sleep can cause aches and fatigue and hinder concentration, learning and memory. Long-term sleep deprivation has been linked to an increased risk of heart problems, diabetes, obesity and psychiatric difficulties like depression and substance abuse. Poor sleep is also a major trigger for chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia, Teitelbaum said.

"Sleep is important for a number of things, and we're still learning. It helps with areas such as brain development, consolidation of memories and enhancement of learning," said Shelby Freedman Harris, a top behavioral therapist with the Sleep-Wake Disorders Center at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City.

A good night's sleep starts with a proper winding down period. Allow at least one hour of relaxation time before bed to give your body a chance to calm down and let your mind drift from the worries of the day.

"Winding down is an important part of sleep hygiene," Harris said. "Creating a buffer period — or a protected period of time between a very stimulating or busy day and bedtime — is helpful to calm down the mind and body, to relax and not bring the daytime to-dos and worries to bed with you. It starts signaling to your body that it is time to go to sleep."

Dim the lights, turn off the cell phone, power down the computer and immerse yourself in a calm, relaxing activity. Read a book, practice deep breathing and relaxation exercises or take up a tranquil hobby like knitting or crochet.

If you must have the television on, skip the

evening news, prime time dramas and horror movies that get your adrenaline flowing and make it harder to fall asleep. Opt for a light-hearted comedy or educational documentary instead.

Harris offers a few additional tips to ensure you fall asleep easily, stay asleep longer and wake refreshed and rejuvenated:

- Set a routine, and be consistent. Establish a regular bedtime and waking time, and stick to it — seven days a week.

- Skip the sleep-disrupting stimulants. Avoid nicotine, alcohol and excessive liquid intake within three hours of bedtime. Limit caffeine to the morning hours. Even a small cup of coffee or a can of soda at lunch can interfere with your body's natural sleep schedule.

- Exercise regularly, but not before bed. Regular physical activity promotes deep sleep, but exercise in the early evening to give your body time to unwind following the stimulating rush of endorphins.

- Keep an eye on comfort. Make sure your bedroom is someplace you want to be. The room should be dark, comfortable and free from noise. Indulge in a decent mattress, plush pillows and nice bed linens, and keep the space clean and clutter-free.

- Don't let the day's worries keep you up at night. Make sure your work and household chores are complete before winding down for the evening. Make a to-do list for the next day then set it aside until morning. That hour or so before bed should be spent relaxing, not fussing over all the things you plan to accomplish tomorrow.

- If you can't fall asleep, don't force it. If you are still lying in bed wide awake within 20 minutes of your bedtime, get up, leave the bedroom and do something relaxing. Go back to bed only when you feel sleepy.