Health Benefits of Sleep

Sleep makes you feel better, but its importance goes way beyond just boosting your mood or banishing under-eye circles.

1. Improve memory

Your mind is surprisingly busy while you snooze. During sleep you can strengthen memories or "practice" skills learned while you were awake (it’s a process called consolidation).

2. Live longer?

Too much or too little sleep is associated with a shorter lifespan—although it’s not clear if it’s a cause or effect. (Illnesses may affect sleep patterns too.) In a 2010 study of women ages 50 to 79, more deaths occurred in women who got less than five hours or more than six and a half hours of sleep per night.

3. Sharpen attention

A lack of sleep can result in ADHD-like symptoms in kids, Dr. Rapoport says. "Kids don't react the same way to sleep deprivation as adults do," he adds. "Whereas adults get sleepy, kids tend to get hyperactive."

4. Have a healthy weight

If you are thinking about going on a diet, you might want to plan an earlier bedtime too. Researchers at the University of Chicago found that dieters who were well rested lost more fat—56% of their weight loss—than those who were sleep deprived, who lost more muscle mass. (They shed similar amounts of total weight regardless of sleep.) "Sleep and metabolism are controlled by the same sectors of the brain," Dr. Rapoport says. "When you are sleepy, certain hormones go up in your blood, and those same hormones drive appetite."

5. Lower stress

When it comes to our health stress and sleep are nearly one and the same—and both can affect cardiovascular health. "Sleep can definitely reduce levels of stress, and with that people can have better control of their blood pressure," Dr. Jean says.

6. Avoid accidents

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported in 2009 that being *tired* accounted for the highest number of fatal single-car run-off-the-road crashes due to the driver’s performance—even more than alcohol! "Sleepiness is grossly underrated as a problem by most people, but the cost to society is enormous," Dr. Rapoport says. "Sleeplessness affects reaction time and decision making." Insufficient sleep for just one night can be as detrimental to your driving ability as having an alcoholic drink.

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