** Four myths about sleep **

Sleep is extremely important as we spend about a third of our life doing it. There is so much information out there about sleep it’s enough to make your head spin. Here, we dispel some of the common myths about sleeping.

**Myth 1: People need less sleep with age**

Fact: People often get less sleep as they get older, in part because they are more likely to develop a sleep disorder such as [insomnia](http://www.sleepeducation.com/sleep-disorders/insomnia/overview-facts) or [sleep apnea](http://www.sleepeducation.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-apnea/overview-facts), says Dr. Philip Gehrman, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. “It's not clear whether older adults need less sleep.  One of the best ways to know how much sleep you need is to gradually give yourself more and more sleep until you feel rested during the day.”

While it’s likely that we need the same amount of sleep that we did as young adults – the natural course of sleep generation, is that we are less able to consolidate sleep for the same lengths of time as when we were younger, says Dr. Robert Basner, director of the sleep center at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center. “Thus, our sleep times tend to be more fragmented – less sleep at night, more napping during the day, for example. We also tend to have less ‘deep’ sleep – that is slow-wave sleep as we age; men are particularly prone to loss of this ‘restorative’ sleep stage with aging.”

**Myth 2: Everyone needs eight hours of sleep**

Fact: While the current national average for adults is closer to 7 hours per night, sleep needs can vary greatly. Anything between 5 and 12 hours per night is accepted as “normal” in our society, says Basner. Obviously children and teens need even more sleep. “This data comes from the fact that less than 6 hours of self-reported sleep per night has been associated with increased mortality, as has longer than 12 hour sleep times. It is also true that many, if most active people report that they do well on relatively fewer hours of sleep per night, while objective measures of their alertness reveal that they are in fact less alert and more sleepy than they realize on that amount – that is, active workers tend to minimize their symptoms of unrefreshing sleep, possibly in order to justify their knowingly curtailing sleep times to accommodate their busy schedules.”

**Myth 3: You can catch up on lost sleep on the weekends**

Fact: It takes more than the two days of the weekend to get back to a rested state, says Gehrman.  “If you try to catch up on the weekends, but then start sleeping less at the beginning of the next week, you quickly end up just as tired as you were at the end of the week. Eventually you can catch up but it takes more than the weekend.”

Depending on how much ‘sleep debt’ you have accumulated, you can catch up on some lost sleep on the weekends, says Basner. “People should try to make up some of that sleep debt in order for optimal restorative sleep and better overall health. One problem with an irregular sleep schedule is that this may lead to problems with falling asleep readily and/or staying asleep as one shifts their circadian rhythms. For example, sleeping in on weekends may reset the circadian clock enough that one may have difficulty falling asleep at the necessary time Sunday night to arise on Monday morning.”

**Myth 4: Watching TV helps you fall asleep**

Fact: While some people like to have the background noise of the TV to help them fall asleep, the changing volume and lighting of the TV can break up the quality of your sleep and may lead you to wake up in the middle of the night, says Gerhman. “If you like background noise it's better to use a fan or sound machine that provides more constant noise.”

Additionally, for some, the program they are watching actually interests them and they will likely stay up longer than is ideal for their schedule, says Basner. “Furthermore, this violates the golden rule of sleep hygiene – using your bed only for sleep and sex. If you learn to associate bedtime with watching TV, you are also in danger of developing ‘learned’ or ‘psychophysiological’ insomnia. Reading a boring book or newspaper in a dim light may be a better option – and again, it’s better to do none of these things once you actually get into bed, unless it indeed does help you to fall asleep readily.”

Source: <http://www.sleepeducation.com/news/2012/10/29/sleep-myths-separating-fact-from-fiction>

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