

Sleep is as Important to Your Health as Diet and Exercise

Sleep is something we all do; in fact, we spend around a third of our lives in this strange, unconscious state. A lack of sleep impacts on our physical and mental health. Too little sleep can devastate your body, brain and microbiome (gut bacteria), dramatically increasing your risk of developing a range of chronic conditions. As adults we should be aiming for 7 to 9 hours per night. However, it isn't just the quantity of the sleep that we get that is important, the quality of sleep has an impact too. In his book, *Fast Asleep*, Dr Michael Mosley provides advice on how to get a really good night's sleep. Fortunately, there are surprising and highly effective ways to improve your sleep quality, ensuring you fall asleep rapidly, get plenty of deep sleep and wake feeling refreshed. This in turn should boost your happiness, creativity and even your life expectancy.

In the book Dr Mosley focuses on improving your 'sleep efficiency'. Your sleep efficiency represents the amount of time you spend in bed fast asleep, as opposed to trying to get to sleep or lying in bed awake, fretting. According to Dr Mosley you should be aiming for a sleep efficiency of 85%.

Without enough sleep we all become tall two-year-olds

Jo Jo Jensen

Surprisingly one of the most effective cures for insomnia involves rebooting the brain by putting yourself through a short course of Sleep Restriction Therapy. One of the classic mistakes people who have problems sleeping make is to try and spend more time in bed – when, for most people, lying in bed not sleeping, isn't restful, it is very stressful. This also sets up a really bad behaviour pattern where your brain comes to associate being in bed with being awake fretting.

The second area of focus proposed by Mosley is an emphasis on food. In particular he advocates for eating more legumes and fibre-rich foods to feed the 'good' bacteria that live in our gut. These bacteria produce chemicals that have been shown to reduce stress and anxiety. The book includes great advice on this.

The impact of caffeine on sleep has long been recognised. The average half-life of caffeine is 5 hours. That means if you have your last coffee at 5 pm, half of the caffeine is still in your system at 10 pm. However, the impact of caffeine varies significantly between individuals. The half-life ranges from 1.5 to 9 hours. If you are someone whose body breaks down caffeine slowly, you can still be feeling the effects of a morning cup of tea or coffee, at bed time.

Are you a morning person or a night owl? Some people prefer to wake early in the morning and back to bed earlier in the evening, whilst others struggle to get out of bed in the morning but can work through late into the night. Mosley includes a great explanation of why children wake early but transition to being night owls as teenagers and then may return to being early risers later in their adult life. Well worth the read!

To improve your sleep:-

- Create a sleep window, the time at which you plan to go to bed and get up each morning, and stick to it as rigidly as you can.
- Improve your sleep hygiene by fostering good bedtime habits, limiting caffeine and alcohol, clearing electronic gadgets from your bedroom and ensuring it is cool, dark and quiet.
- Unlike sleeping pills, melatonin seems to improve sleep quality without causing addiction. There is limited evidence for the effectiveness of magnesium, lavender or other over-the-counter remedies.
- Breathing exercises are an excellent way of slowing your heart and distracting your thoughts.
- If you wake in the night and find it hard to get back to sleep, get out of bed and do not return until you feel sleepy.

Sleep is just as important to our health, as diet and exercise.

Key points

Aim for sleep efficiency of 85% (time asleep vs awake, fretting)

Consider Sleep Restriction Therapy to break bad habits and reset

The impact of caffeine varies greatly

Create a sleep window and stick to it

Improve sleep hygiene

Breathing exercises slow the heart and distract the mind

If you can't get back to sleep, get out of bed and do not return until feeling sleepy

Read *Fast Asleep* by Dr Michael Mosley



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