

SLEEP AND HEART HEALTH: WHAT TO KNOW



One of the keys to heart health can be found beneath the covers: The American Heart Association recently added sleep to its checklist of what's important for a healthy heart.

Sleep now joins physical activity, diet, weight, blood sugar, cholesterol, blood pressure, and nicotine exposure in what the American Heart Association calls Life's Essential 8™.

"Sleep is something you can do on an individual level to potentially protect or improve your heart health," says Dr. Marwah Abdalla, a cardiologist at

NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Unfortunately, many people are not getting enough sleep: Almost half of all Americans say they feel sleepy during the day between three and seven days a week, according to the National Sleep Foundation (NSF), which recommends between seven and nine hours of sleep a night for healthy adults and between nine and 13 hours for children, depending on their age.

"We live on the edge in terms of sleep," says Dr. Ana Krieger, director of the Center for Sleep Medicine at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center and Weill Cornell Medicine.

"We need to make sleep a priority."

1 Sleep Apnea's Impact on the Heart

One of the biggest threats to sleep and heart health is a common sleep disorder, obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), which occurs when the muscles in the back of your throat relax too much and narrow your airways, causing you to repeatedly stop and start breathing while you sleep.

Symptoms of sleep apnea include excessive tiredness during the day; loud snoring, punctuated by gasping or choking sounds; persistent headaches in the morning; dry mouth upon waking; and restless sleep, according to the NSF.

The frequent drops in oxygen "can lead to all sorts of stress on the body, including damaging the vessels that supply blood to the heart, and can cause direct injury to the heart itself," says Dr. Abdalla.

"The heart and lungs share space in the chest wall, so as the lungs labor to breathe, the heart is also subjected to that physical stress, which can thicken the heart muscles and affect the function of the heart," says Dr. Krieger.

Sleep apnea treatments include oral guards to bring the jaw forward to open up the airway space, or a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine, a mask that helps restore airflow while you sleep.

2 Sleep Quantity Matters

How much you sleep matters. "When you don't sleep enough, you feel on edge," says Dr. Abdalla.

Dr. Abdalla is leading research to better understand the connection between sleep and blood pressure. In a large study published in the International Journal of Cardiology Hypertension, Dr. Abdalla and her colleagues assessed the sleep habits and blood pressure of nearly 900 working adults. The study found that shorter sleep duration is associated with higher blood pressure in a 24-hour period and potential cardiovascular risk.

3 Tips to Prioritize Sleep

While there is no simple button to press to make sure you get enough good, quality sleep each night, there are steps you can take to understand and respect your body's rhythm.

Dr. Abdalla and Dr. Krieger agree that preparing for a good night's sleep starts long before you tuck yourself under the covers. That means getting light exposure throughout the day, limiting caffeine intake, and managing stress.

They also encourage creating a dark, cold environment for sleep, and avoiding stimuli late at night, like exercise or too much time on your phone or other device. "One of the most offensive things to sleep is our phones," says Dr. Abdalla, who advises people to keep phones out of the bedroom and not use them as your alarm.

Stress and worry are other culprits that keep people awake at night, say Dr. Abdalla and Dr. Krieger, who both suggest keeping a worry log to get thoughts out. Meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises are other positive ways to relax and help mitigate worry.