

## Better Sleep: The Truth Behind 10 Sleep Myths

*Source: Eileen Livers, Cleveland Clinic (Ohio Site) Wellness*  
Published June 30, 2012



Credit: BananaStock

**Myth: You need eight hours of sleep a night.**

**Truth: Everyone has different sleep needs.**

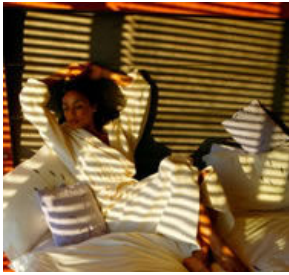
There is absolutely nothing magical about the number eight. The amount of sleep we need at night to feel alert during the day varies from person to person. For some, it may in fact be eight, but for others that needed number may be six. The key is to figure out your individual sleep needs and not to stress about needing exactly eight hours of sleep each night. You can figure out your individual sleep needs based on how many hours of sleep lead to you feeling rested and restored the next day.



**Myth: More sleep is always better.**

**Truth: Studies show that excess sleep is not necessarily healthy.**

Studies have found that people who sleep between six and eight hours a night actually have the lowest death rates, while those sleeping more than eight hours a night have progressively increasing rates of death. Although it's unclear whether sleeping longer causes poor health or is actually a symptom or result of other health issues, some health issues do correlate with spending more time in bed, including obstructive sleep apnea, depression and uncontrolled diabetes.



**Myth: Sleeping late on weekends makes up for lost sleep Monday through Friday.**

**Truth: Consistency is best — our bodies prefer that we rise at the same time every morning.**

This pattern of lack of sleep during the week and “catching up” by bingeing on sleep over the weekend upsets your circadian rhythms and makes it even harder to get refreshing sleep. Which is why Sunday nights tend to be the most difficult night for people to fall asleep. It’s easy to see why: If you sleep in until 11 a.m. on Sunday morning, you can’t expect your body to be ready to go to sleep by 10 p.m. just because you have to wake up at 6 a.m. Monday for work. That tossing and turning in bed? That’s your sleep drive telling you that it didn’t get the chance to build up enough steam to be ready for snoozing. And so, instead of correcting your deficit of lack of sleep from the week before, you make things worse — creating a cycle of sleep problems.



Credit: Comstock Images

**Myth: Watching TV in bed can help you wind down and fall asleep.**

**Truth: Watching TV close to bedtime and especially in the bedroom hinders quality sleep.**

Television is stimulating (the noise, the flashing light, the engagement of your brain), and certain nighttime shows (crime dramas, the nightly news) also add tension to the mix — which obviously doesn’t help you relax and get ready to snooze. And if you watch TV while in bed, you wind up associating being in bed with being awake, not with being asleep. Watching in bed can also lead to middle-of-the-night waking if you fall asleep with the TV on.

TV isn’t the only sleep-incompatible activity common in bed. You should also avoid eating, talking on the phone, checking e-mail, working and paying bills. Talk about tension!



**Myth: When you can't sleep, you should just rest in bed.**

**Truth: When you can't sleep, you should get out of bed.**

Lying in bed for long periods of time not sleeping leads to “conditioned arousal,” which means that you learn to pair the bed and bedroom with being awake rather than with being asleep — a problem for anyone experiencing sleep problems. And since lying in bed awake when what you really want to be doing is sleeping typically causes you to feel upset, frustrated and annoyed, you're not really resting, are you?



**Myth: Over-the-counter medications (OTCs) are safer than prescription sleep aids.**

**Truth: OTCs have a host of side effects you're better off avoiding.**

Using sleep medications for the long term, especially over-the-counter (OTC) medications, often have side effects. Yes, you're trying to sleep, but the drowsiness caused by the antihistamines in many of these products is not the feeling you need, especially when you might end up feeling drowsy — and lousy — the next day. With OTC drugs, you may also experience blurred vision, muddled thinking and dry mouth.

Both OTC and prescription sleep aids can lose their effectiveness over time, but the problem is greater with OTC products. Some people worry about becoming addicted to prescription sleep aids, but the truth is that unless you have a substance abuse disorder, the risk is rather modest.

If you're going to try a sleep aid, please discuss it with your doctor before you self-medicate. Your doctor should be able to help you find the right solution, whether it's medication or a treatment plan that includes lifestyle changes and adjustments to your sleep patterns.



Credit: Ryan McVay

**Myth: Alcohol helps you sleep.**

**Truth: Alcohol can help you fall asleep — but not stay asleep.**

It's true that alcohol makes you feel drowsy and that it can help you initially fall asleep — it is a depressant, after all. The trouble starts after you've fallen asleep: Alcohol creates problems during the second half of the sleep cycle, when the relaxing effects have worn off. Alcohol has what's called a short half-life, which means that it wears off relatively quickly. Once it does, your body experiences rebound arousal and insomnia. Making matters worse, alcohol usually suppresses deep sleep and makes sleep far less refreshing than normal. It causes lighter, fragmented sleep with more awakenings, especially in the early morning. If you're going to drink alcohol in the evening, your best bet is to limit your consumption and stop at least a few hours before bedtime.



**Myth: If you're experiencing insomnia, napping can help reduce exhaustion.**

**Truth: If you're having sleep problems, napping often makes the problem worse.**

For people who usually don't have problems with sleep at night, a short afternoon nap can be very helpful for making it through a tiresome day. Research suggests that a 45-minute daytime nap can improve memory function and lower blood pressure. It may even reduce death by cardiovascular events.

However, for people with insomnia, napping can actually be counterproductive because it reduces your chances of sleeping a full night. Avoiding all naps if possible provides better preparation for a more continuous sleep period at night.



**Myth: It doesn't matter if you miss sleep — you'll just be tired.**

**Truth: Sleep is essential for your body to perform routine maintenance.**

Sleep is more than simply a period of rest. In fact, it ranks right up there with diet and exercise in terms of being vital to your health and well-being. During sleep, your body works hard — creating long-term memories and doing repair damage from the day. There's a reason people advise you to “sleep on it” prior to making a big decision. One of the benefits of sleep is that it allows your brain to better process new experiences and information, which leads to increased understanding and retention. In addition, while you're sleeping your body produces extra protein molecules that help your immune system and strengthen your ability to fight infection and stay healthy.



Credit: Thinkstock Images

**Myth: Exercising before bed makes you tired and, therefore, helps you sleep.**

**Truth: Exercising can help sleep, but not right before bed.**

While it's true that exercise can help you sleep, doing it too close to bedtime can result in the opposite effect. Exercise stimulates your heart, brain and muscles — the opposite of what you want to happen if you're trying to snooze. It also raises your body temperature right before bed, which is counterproductive to sleep as well. That said, regular exercise — performed at the right time — can help you sleep longer and more soundly, as well as feel more awake during the day.

Morning exercise can relieve stress and improve mood, which can have indirect improvements on sleep. And if you head outdoors, exposure to natural light can improve sleep at night by reinforcing your body's natural sleep-wake cycle.

The late afternoon is another good time to exercise because of the relationship between body temperature and sleep. Body temperatures rise during exercise and take as long as six hours to begin to drop. Late afternoon exercise coincides nicely, with the body temperature cooling off just before the onset of sleep. Choose what works best for you — just be sure to get in your workout at least three hours before bedtime.