

The Secrets of Natural Sleep

If a lack of sleep is a regular occurrence for you, learn how to live life more restfully with the help of Sleep Expert Dr Nerina Ramlakhan, says **Julie Penfold.**

Sleep is one of life's simple pleasures and is vital for maintaining a healthy mind and body. As we rush throughout each day, balancing a busy lifestyle while juggling work, family and social responsibilities; taking care of our health can quickly become overlooked. Caffeine, sugary snacks and energy drinks are all too often relied upon to perk up energy levels throughout the day, while little or no time is set aside for unwinding. As the mind has no opportunity to process information, it waits until bedtime when the frantic pace of the day has finally stopped to recap; resulting in a poor restless sleep. Poor sleep can affect mood, concentration, judgement and reduce our ability to fight off minor ailments. While long-term sleep deprivation can lead to health problems including diabetes, heart disease and clinical depression.

'There is a major healing process that goes on when we sleep; sleep is absolutely fundamental to our health,' says Dr Nerina Ramlakhan. 'If downtime is not built into the day, we are then working against the body's natural physiological rhythms. The part of the brain, which is called the working memory houses the information, which we receive on a day-to-day basis and this is overloaded for many of us. If there is no rest time built into the day; the working memory has an added task to complete: to file and process events and information.'

Starting the day

Despite being told from a young age that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, many of us choose not to eat for time constraint reasons, lack of hunger, or simply just a desire to spend a while longer in bed. This in itself can put you on the path to poor sleep. Getting your nutrition right is critical to improving your sleep. It all starts with eating breakfast within 30-45 minutes of waking up as there is a biochemical link back to sleep.

Nerina explains: 'The biochemical link is based on your blood glucose levels and when you wake up first thing on a morning, you are naturally in a state of starvation as several hours have passed since you last ate. Your brain is a hunter-gatherer and has a caveman mechanism where it makes a decision as to whether or not there is an adequate supply of food based on whether or not you eat

'There is a major healing process that goes on when we sleep; sleep is absolutely fundamental to our health' - Dr Nerina Ramlakhan.

breakfast. There is a 45-minute period that elapses before it makes this decision. If you do not eat in that timeframe; your brain will move into starvation mode.

'Starvation mode is when your blood sugar levels are low, yet your body is in activity mode as you move around getting ready for work or the school run. Your brain reads this as a survival situation and moves into conservation mode. This is when your fat stores are used as fat is the most concentrated source of energy in the body. You hold onto and conserve fat when you are in a starvation situation; the body then starts to scan for other sources of fuel and opts for carbohydrates. In order to mobilise your carbohydrate supplies, you need adrenalin to start breaking down muscle protein.

'Your levels of adrenalin are increased if you do not eat breakfast and your brain starts to shut down non-essential functions including the production of the hormones, serotonin and melatonin. Melatonin is the hormone required at the end of the day to sleep and by skipping breakfast you produce less melatonin and as your adrenalin levels are higher, you will feel more anxious towards the end of the day and therefore less able to sleep.'

Ensuring you eat healthily and minimise sugary snacks is essential for keeping your brain and body contented. Sugar causes the body to run on a higher energy pattern, which creates highs and lows as the quick-fix energy hit wears off; this sparks a need for more sugar in the body via snacks and caffeine. Eating little and often and keeping hydrated with water and fruit juices; while minimising fizzy drinks and too much caffeine will ready mind and body for sleep. Caffeine should be avoided after 2pm each day if you are having trouble sleeping.

And so to bed

Avoid over-stimulation at night, by carefully choosing what you watch on TV and also what you read. For bookworms, ensure the subject matter is light and easy to read, which will set your brain at a pace, which is slow and relaxing. For avid TV viewers, you may find you are sensitive to what you watch, and find your mind focuses on what you have just seen, so choose your programme or film subject carefully.

Nerina adds: 'Managing technology is very important as you need a break from TV, computers, emails and Blackberrys before going to bed otherwise you are over stimulating your mind and it will be unable to find processing time. Set boundaries with technology and keep all gadgets out of the bedroom.'

Incorporating more movement and exercise into your life is incredibly important for sleep. Nerina suggests exercising 3-4 times per week and stretching those legs and refreshing mind and body with a daily walk; even just a short walk for those frantically busy. Try to build rest into your day, by meditation or power napping as the 15-minute time out from your day will create that internal chemistry that is just right for sleep.

Time to unwind

For those who are agitated and frustrated at the thought of another restless night's sleep Nerina recommends replacing the word 'sleep' and all its associations with disappointment and tiredness with calming phrases such as 'I want to rest' or 'I want to relax'. The trick is to remind your physiology how to be relaxed and learn how to be ready for sleep again. Additionally, if you are prone to moving around frequently in bed, Nerina recommends taking a magnesium supplement at night to help the body to relax and prevent restless legs.

To help your mind unwind before bedtime, try out this simple bedtime exercise created by Nerina, which allows thoughts to process in the mind, while you simply lie back and feel a deep sense of calm.

'Before getting into bed, try this simple relaxation exercise to help settle the body for sleep. Lie on the floor with your legs up the wall or over the side of your bed and breathe slowly remaining in that posture for five minutes with your arms out at the side. Think freely and allow thoughts to come and go out of your mind while you remain in position. Ensure the room is quiet and free from music or background noise. By following this exercise nightly, it will allow your mind to diffuse before sleep. This will help make sure your mind is in the right place for sleep.'

Ensure you climb into bed in a positive frame of mind, even if you have experienced a challenging day, says Nerina: 'I always say to my clients, when you go to bed, make sure you have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I think that is one of the best ways of guaranteeing you will get up the following morning raring to go with a spring in your step.'

Further information:

Dr Nerina Ramlakhan will release *Tired But Wired*, a self-help guide on overcoming sleep problems in May 2010, published by Souvenir Press. More information on Dr Ramlakhan can be found via www.equilibriumolutions.com