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Prevention News

Why Can't We Sleep?

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By Markham Heid



The National Sleep Foundation recently conducted a large, multi-country study in an effort to understand how Americans stack up against the rest of the developed world when it comes to sleep. The results probably won't surprise you: Compared to every nation save Japan, Americans caught the fewest ZZZsaveraging just 6.5 hours per night. Roughly 56% of U.S. respondents also said they

Ads byweren the sleep in gradequately on work nights—again, among the worst of all countries polled.

But one figure was surprising: When asked if their schedules allowed adequate time for sleep, more than 70% of Americans said "yes", which placed the U.S. near the top of the polls.

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These results beg the question: Since most of us have time for sleep, why are we sleeping so poorly?

The answer is likely lurking on your desk, in your pocket, or on your bedside table. "The use of electronic devices like cell phones, tablets, and computers is something that's changed just in the past 10 to 15 years, and I think that's a big part of the problem," says Namni Goel, PhD, who studies sleep disorders at the University of Pennsylvania.

Just an hour or two spent staring at your phone or iPad is enough to lower your levels of the sleep hormone melatonin by 22%, finds a study from New York's Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. How? Artificial light from electronics confuses the sensors in your eyes that detect

daylight and help regulate your sleep cycle, the research indicates.

More from Prevention: The Noise That Will Help You Sleep

And it's not just the light from these devices that's bombarding your system, says Raymond Hall, DC, a sleep researcher and inventor of the PILLO1 sleep aid. The constant stream of information your phone and computer pump into your brain leaves you wired and anxious, Dr. Hall explains. Your brain needs time each day to relax and clean house. But if you're constantly stimulating your noodle with new data, the only time your mind has to unwind is after you've turned out your light, Hall says.

All this may explain why 50 to 70 million Americans suffer from sleep disorders or deprivation, according to a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And roughly 9 million Americans choose to combat their sleep issues with prescription drugs. Women and adults older than 50 are especially likely to pop a sleeping pill, the CDC research shows.

"Taking a pill seems easy," Dr. Goel says. "You swallow one and you fall asleep. But you're not getting deep, natural rest." As a result, people who rely on prescription aids tend to feel tired and muddled during the day, which Dr. Goel calls a "sleep hangover." So you take another pill the next night, and eventually you can't fall asleep on your own, she says. "It's a big cycle that feeds itself."





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Taking a sleeping pill every night could also put your health in danger. Regular use of prescription sleep aids was linked to a 35% increase in cancer risk, according to a comprehensive BMJ study. Rates of death also skyrocketed nearly 350% (yes, you read that right) among people taking just 1 to 18 sleeping pills annually compared to those who never use a sleep aid, the study found. The researchers say clinical trials are necessary to determine why sleeping pills may be linked to death or cancer.

So. The million dollar question: If drugs aren't the answer, what is?

Routine, routine, routine. "A regular sleep-wake schedule is absolutely critical," Dr. Goel says. Follow these three steps, and you'll sleep more soundly:

- **1. Unwind before bed.** Turn off all electronic devices, dim the lights, and spend that last hour before bed listening to mellow music, reading, or meditating, Dr. Goel advises. Research has shown yoga, a warm (but not hot) shower, and scents like lavender or any other one that you find pleasant can also help ease you into the land of nod.
- **2. Set the mood.** Just as light can stimulate your brain, an absence of light lulls you to sleep. Your bedroom should be as dark as possible, and below 75 degrees, to promote the best rest, recommends the National Sleep Foundation.
- **3. Get up at the same time every day—even on weekends.** The hour you rise establishes your sleep schedule, shows research from Kansas State University. And so even if you've slept poorly, it's important to haul your butt out of bed at the same time each day. The earlier, the better. People who rise with the sun feel happier and more satisfied with life, shows a study from the University of Toronto.

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