

Quality sleep, necessity not luxury



**YOUR
HEALTH**

DR GITA MATHAI

All of our work, activity and exercise during the day cause microscopic tears in muscle fibres. The brain, too, becomes depleted of essential chemicals. To repair and recover, both the body and brain require adequate rest and sleep.

Our digestive system also benefits from rest. A 12-hour gap between dinner and breakfast allows intestinal cells to replenish enzymes vital for digestion. During this fasting period, beneficial gut bacteria, our individual gut microbe — now recognised as central to overall health — get a chance to recover, replenish and multiply.

Even elite athletes schedule one or two rest days a week to allow their muscles to recuperate. These “rest days” often involve light activity such as walking or swimming, not total inactivity. Ordinary individuals also need one day a week off from intense exercise. However, skipping three consecutive days of physical activity can undo any previous gains.

The amount of rest or sleep needed varies by age. Babies require 10-14 hours of sleep, while adults need 7-9 hours. Adequate sleep supports growth and development, especially that of the brain in children. It aids physical and mental recovery in all age groups. During sleep, chemicals in the brain and muscles are metabolised and internal balances are restored.

Modern lifestyles are hectic and time-constrained, with academic, family and work pressures. This often leads to chronic tension and release of “stress hormones”. Inadequate or poor-quality sleep fails to clear stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol from the bloodstream. This keeps the body in a perpetual “fight or flight” state, raising heart rate, blood pressure and blood sugar levels while weakening immune response, leading to frequent infections. As a result, lifestyle-related diseases worsen. Sug-

ars are uncontrolled. Mental health can also suffer. This can manifest as depression, anxiety, poor concentration, bad memory and a general lack of motivation.

Quality sleep is essential for normal recovery and function. Children, especially, struggle to rest when the household is active, with lights on and the television blaring. Fixed sleep and wake schedules, a dark and cool room, and switching off all devices are vital for everyone. A warm bath or a glass of milk before bed may also help.

Many adults have difficulty falling asleep. Instead of addressing underlying causes like stress, anxiety, depression or poor routines, people may turn to over-the-counter or prescription sleeping pills. These medications are tightly regulated, yet a thriving black market exists. Unfortunately, many patients use these drugs as a crutch, without medical supervision.

The tablets may be habit-forming, requiring progressively larger doses with diminishing effects.

Others may resort to alcohol, mistaking its sedative effect as a sleep aid. While alcohol may initially induce drowsiness, it fragments sleep and reduces total rest time. This

leads to poor-quality restless sleep and may pave the way for regular use, larger quantities, dependence and health complications.



ISTOCK.COM/WIROKLYNGZ

Instead of medication, try the following for better sleep:

- Avoid eating or exercising for at least an hour before bedtime
- Ensure at least 30 minutes of aerobic activity each day
- Maintain a fixed sleep schedule, even on weekends
- Turn off all electronic devices at least 30 minutes before sleeping
- Apply castor oil gently to the upper eyelids and below the eyes, massaging in 10 small circles
- Lie down, stretch, and flex and extend your toes 20 times
- Try mental exercises such as counting backwards from 1000 in steps of three (e.g., 1000, 997, 994...).

Good sleep is not a luxury. It is essential for health, well-being and productivity. Rest your body, reset your mind and recover your energy every night.

The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. If you have any questions on health issues please write to yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in