

Catch Your ZZZs

Getting the proper amount of sleep each night is important. When healthcare providers look at an individual's overall health, they typically ask about their eating habits and the amount of activity they get each week – but they also often ask what your sleep schedule looks like. Sleep is so important for our health that the National Sleep Foundation launched Sleep Awareness Week in 1998 – and it kicks off each year with the start of daylight saving time, when most people lose an hour of sleep.

While many people tend to try and power through after a night of limited sleep, and may even pride themselves on this, it is not healthy in the long run.

So, why is sleep so crucial for our health?

“A lot of important things happen when we sleep. Our body cells and tissues can regenerate and restore at that point. Sleep is very important for our cognitive health – our mind and mental functions. If you have gone on very few hours of sleep, you know the next day can be extremely tough. That is the main thing, just restorative and allowing your organs and things like that to rest,” says Tim Schultz, RRT, RCP, an OSF HealthCare respiratory therapy manager.

The National Sleep Foundation recommends different daily sleep amounts depending on age – newborns to age five range from needing about 10-16 hours of sleep per day, children from age six to 18 need a range of about eight to 11 hours per day, and adults and seniors should get anywhere from seven to nine hours. About a third of adults in the United States, however, report they usually get less than the recommended amount of sleep, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Lack of proper sleep, even just a night or two, can have a significant negative impact on the rest of your day – from poor performance at work or school to more serious effects like struggling to keep your eyes open on long drives. In fact, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that fatigue is a cause of 100,000 motor vehicle crashes each year in the U.S. In order to stay awake and alert, many people resort to [overconsuming caffeine](#), which then backfires when your head hits the pillow and you are unable to fall asleep even after being tired all day. This can result in a cycle of sleepless nights.

According to the CDC, not getting enough sleep in the long run is linked with many chronic diseases and conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and depression.

In order to combat this, many health care providers recommend practicing good sleep habits – or “[sleep hygiene](#)” – to help with your sleep schedule. While this is not a one night fix, Shultz says the goal is to adjust and acclimate your body to these habits over time.

“There is a term called ‘sleep hygiene’ and it is just kind of a list of things that help to improve sleep for anyone. One of those things is going to sleep at the same time and trying to get up at the same time every day. A good routine works wonders. Keeping your bedroom cool, making sure your bedroom is dark – especially if you’re a shift worker. If you have to invest in a room darkening shade, do it,” Schultz advises.

He adds: “During sleep, the body naturally lowers its temperature by one or two degrees. Most of the data that I’ve seen is that if you could keep your bedroom at 67 or 68 degrees, that’s a good temperature to help kind of induce you into sleep. For others, it may be cooler than that.”

Schultz also recommends avoiding screen time before bed and skipping the caffeine in the afternoon – especially if you struggle with sleep.

If you are someone who wakes up frequently in the middle of the night, Shultz recommends getting out of bed and doing something relaxing in a different room in order to not further disturb your sleep. Instead, find a comfortable spot on a couch or chair, keep the lights dim, read a book, journal your thoughts at the time, or simply shut your eyes and relax. You may even benefit from a [white noise machine](#) or a [smartphone app](#) to help you sleep through the night – as long as you do not scroll on your phone when using it.

And while melatonin is a highly popular sleep supplement, Schultz says that should be utilized on an individualized basis and to do your research before taking it. Asking your provider how much they recommend you take and when is also important.

“A lot of people have had success with melatonin. I would only caution if you are a person who is on a lot of prescription medications to run that by your provider and make sure that it’s not going to interact with anything else that you are taking,” advises Schultz.

So you have tried everything under the sun (or moon) and still struggle with sleep. Now what?

“If you go through all of the things to try and help – the journaling, the bedtime routine – you may need to see your provider and see if there might be something else going on. A lot of people who suffer from insomnia actually may have [sleep apnea](#), and as they are nodding off, they are awakened because they have a pause in breathing and they don’t even realize it,” Schultz says.

If you struggle with sleep and do not have a primary care provider to consult with, find one at [osfhealthcare.org](#).