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A Good Night's Sleep Essential for Heart Health

February is National Heart Health month, and it's a great time to evaluate how well you are taking care of your ticker. Most of us know that a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean protein and low-fat dairy is important, as well as being physically active, controlling diabetes and high blood pressure, not smoking and consuming alcohol in moderation if at all. An additional factor to heart health – one that is often overlooked - is getting enough sleep. Most adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep daily, yet more than one-third of Americans report not getting the recommended amount of sleep.

According to the National Sleep Foundation and National Institutes of Health, sleep is essential for a healthy heart. People who don't sleep enough are at higher risk for cardiovascular disease and coronary heart disease—regardless of age, weight, smoking and exercise habits. Getting enough good quality sleep is important if you want to lower your risk of these conditions. It's not completely clear why less sleep is detrimental to heart health, but researchers understand that sleeping too little causes disruptions in underlying health conditions and biological processes like glucose metabolism, blood pressure, and inflammation.

The struggle to get a good night's sleep can be real! Sleep problems are frustrating and exhausting but with a little dedication they do not have to be a part of your nightly routine. These tips can help you get to sleep and improve the quality of your sleep.

- 1. Keep a consistent sleep schedule and bedtime routine.**

Going to bed and getting up every day at the same time helps your body get into the rhythm it needs to fall asleep at night with ease. Even on weekends, try to sleep no more than one hour later than you do on weekdays. Create your own bedtime routine and follow it.

- 2. Avoid too much coffee or alcohol late in the day.**

Coffee, as a stimulant, drunk later in the day can keep your mind spinning way past bedtime. Also, studies have shown that once alcohol's sedative qualities wear off, sleep quality is affected by increased and sporadic wake periods during the night.

- 3. Use your bed only for sleep.**

Although it is tempting to read, watch TV, or work on your computer while in your bed, this may not be best for your sleep hygiene. Train your body to associate being in bed with sleeping.

- 4. Decrease mental stimulation before bed.**

With frequently hectic lifestyles, many US adults often work up to the very last minute of each day without setting any time aside for relaxation. If you sense muscle tension is to blame, try practicing yoga, engaging in meditation, or using breathing exercises to loosen up your tension before going to bed.

- 5. Get regular physical activity.**

In addition to its important role in weight management and prevention of many chronic illnesses, adding physical activity to your daily routine can help facilitate sleep when you need it most. However, try not to exercise too close to your normal bedtime as this may lead to difficulty in falling asleep.

6. **Skip the big meals before heading to bed.**

Eating large amounts of food close to bedtime can lead discomfort such as heartburn, acid reflux, and other gastrointestinal issues. If you are hungry close to your bedtime, try eating a light snack or drinking a soothing, non-caffeinated beverage to ease your hunger symptoms and prepare yourself for a restful night sleep.

7. **Refrain from long naps.**

Long naps can contribute to late night alertness and throw off your night time sleep routine. If you feel you need a nap, limit it to 10-15 minutes. This can provide a quick recharge from fatigue without sacrificing your sleep quality at night.

8. **Manage your nicotine use.**

As a stimulant, nicotine can leave users lying wide awake at night or waking up throughout the night with cravings. It is best to avoid nicotine, yet if you are a nicotine user, try to avoid use 4-6 hours before bedtime.

9. **Consider the "20-minute rule."**

If after 20 minutes of lying in bed you find yourself still awake, move to another quiet space and engage in relaxing activities such as reading or listening to calming music. Once you begin to feel drowsy, try to go back to bed again.

10. **Make a to-do list and then "park" it for the night.**

Work, financial issues, and many other life worries are enough to keep our minds spinning late into the night. Instead of focusing on these sources of anxiety, try writing a "to-do" list before bedtime to remind yourself where to pick up the next day.

These strategies are inexpensive fixes to sleep issues that can offer many health benefits. If falling asleep continues to be difficult, talk with your physician about other options to help you get a good night's sleep.

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