

The Magic Power of Sleep

How it makes you happier, healthier, sexier, even thinner.

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From [Reader's Digest](#)

Enhance Your Life With Sleep

When did 24-7 become a way of life? The massive decline in sleep happened so slowly and seamlessly that few seemed to notice the trend. Was it because of the baby boomlet and all those 2 a.m. feedings? The growing seduction of the Internet, video games and endless TV channels? Never disconnecting from work? No matter how it happened, millions of chronically sleep-deprived Americans are putting their health, quality of life and even *length* of life in jeopardy. New evidence shows why getting enough z's may trump all your other priorities.

Magic Power #1. Live Longer and Healthier

Some 40 percent of Americans get less than seven hours of shut-eye on weeknights, and for many of them, it's taking a toll. "The link between sleep and health, and bad sleep and disease, is becoming clearer and clearer," says Lawrence Epstein, MD, author of [The Harvard Medical School Guide to a Good Night's Sleep](#). For example, sleep duration has declined from a median of eight hours in the 1950s to seven in recent years. At the same time, high blood pressure has become an increasing problem. Blood pressure and heart rate are typically at their lowest levels during sleep; people who sleep less tend to have higher blood pressure. The association between hypertension and sleep duration could explain other research findings linking lack of sleep to increased risk of heart attack, diabetes, weight gain and other problems.

Sleeping better may help you fight off illness. "When people are sleep-deprived, there are higher levels of stress hormones in their bodies and an increase in inflammation, both of which can decrease immune function," says Phyllis Zee, MD, associate director of the Center for Sleep and Circadian Biology at Northwestern University in Chicago.

In fact, bed rest may make your flu shot work better as well. In a University of Chicago study, men who were vaccinated while being deprived of sleep (they were not allowed to sleep more than four hours a night) produced less than half the antibodies to the flu virus as vaccinated men who got a full night's sleep.

Simply stated, people who sleep well live longer. So say good night sooner, and it may help you stay active and vital to a ripe old age.

Look Better and Stress Less

Magic Power #2. Look Better, Feel Better

People limited to only four or five hours of sleep a night for several nights not only experience more physical ailments, such as headaches and stomach problems, but also undergo changes in metabolism similar to those occurring with normal aging. It's no wonder we look terrible after a sleepless night.

One of the reasons may be growth hormones. They're essential to keeping us looking good as we get older. Levels of the hormone drop dramatically between the ages of 20 and 60, says heart surgeon Mehmet C. Oz, MD, coauthor of the [You](#) health books. "Growth hormones are rejuvenating," he says. "When you have high levels of the hormone, you have muscle mass, better skin—you look sexy. You want to keep your growth hormones as high as possible, and the number one best way to do that is sleep." When you don't look good, you don't feel sexy, and your relationship can suffer. So getting more sleep can rev up your love life too.

Magic Power #3. Be Happier, Less Stressed

More than half of adults surveyed by the National Sleep Foundation in 2005 said they experienced insomnia at least a few nights a week. People with insomnia produce higher rates of stress hormones than others, according to new research. This puts their bodies in a hyperaroused state that can make it difficult for them to wind down and sleep. The inability to sleep causes more stress, which can have a devastating impact.

"You're depressed, you keep forgetting things—not sleeping was the most horrible thing that ever happened to me," recalls Paul Nielsen, 42, of Niles, Illinois, who says that when his insomnia was at its worst, he went 30 days with only about 30 hours of sleep. "I missed days of work. I even drove my car onto the lawn and into some bushes because I just couldn't focus anymore."

"People who don't sleep get depressed, and depression causes insomnia, so it's a vicious cycle," says Dr. Oz. "But we know the inverse is true: that more and better sleep can make you feel happier."

Smarten Up and Slim Down

Magic Power #4. Build a Better Brain

Not only does sleep deprivation lead to poor health, it also affects concentration, problem-solving skills, memory and mood. "Anything that disturbs the quality and quantity of sleep can have long-term consequences for both body and mind," says Gerard T. Lombardo, MD, author of [Sleep to Save Your Life](#), and director of the Sleep Center at Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn.

Lack of sleep can have cognitive and physical effects similar to those brought on by overindulging in alcohol. The performance of someone who's been awake for 17 hours straight is about the same as if she had a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent (about two drinks in an hour).

And night owls, beware: A new study shows that people with two copies of a gene variant that helps control our body clocks tend toward a "late to bed, late to rise" sleeping pattern. They may suffer worse cognitive deficits after sleep deprivation, such as forgetfulness and trouble concentrating.

Some 1,500 deaths a year result from car accidents caused by people driving while fatigued. And a disturbing new study conducted by the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Maryland shows that lack of sleep can affect people's moral judgment. This finding has obvious implications for people like doctors and soldiers, whose decisions have life-and-death consequences. But think what could happen if sleep-deprived teachers, businesspeople, lawyers, homebuilders and others were more subject to moral lapses. Better sleep may equal better decision making.

Magic Power #5. Lose a Few Pounds

It should come as no surprise that the trend toward shorter sleep duration in this country has coincided with an increasing trend toward obesity. Recent studies suggest that people who get inadequate amounts of sleep are more likely to gain weight. "With sleep deprivation, we see a reduction in metabolism and an increase in appetite," explains Michael Breus, PhD, author of [Good Night: The Sleep Doctor's 4-Week Program to Better Sleep and Better Health](#). Inadequate sleep lowers levels of leptin, the hormone that causes you to feel full, while increasing levels of ghrelin, the hormone that makes you feel hungry.

"What's also fascinating," notes Breus, "is that sleep deprivation influences your food choices, making you crave high-carb and high-sugar foods." This is because sleep loss decreases insulin sensitivity, putting the sleep-deprived at higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes. So sleep more and it may be easier to fight that cookie craving, and wake up a whole new you.

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