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Early to Bed: Why All the Fuss?

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Why is sleep so important? I recall asking myself that very question when I was challenged by my breast cancer diagnosis and began doing research on natural protocols. Sleep kept popping up, along with hydration and implementing healthy diet and lifestyle changes. I was surprised by the research I found about sleep, something I had not realized about meeting the sandman each evening and especially the positive effect sleep has on our immune system.

We've all heard that sleep is essential to vitality, health and wellness. But quality sleep, coveted by all of us, is very hard to find as we hit the pillow at night. It's this quality sleep that can make a huge difference in our well-being because it protects our physical, emotional and mental health.

Did you know that the only time our bodies can start to heal or repair is when we are sleeping or not eating? When awake we expend energy by taking on the day's tasks and digesting food. Our bodies need time to heal on a cellular level and sleep is the key to this door. During sleep, our bodies work to support healthy brain function and physical health, and with kids it supports growth and development. Sleep also helps our brains prepare for the next day, to find new pathways for learning and recalling information. Studies show that good sleep can enhance learning in things like music, sports, math, science and problem-solving and it helps us stay focused and on target. Lack of sleep alters brain activity and may cause an imbalance in our emotions and ability cope with changes.

Sleep defends against toxins, impacts how our immune system responds, is essential to physical health and is involved with healing and repairing our bodies including the heart and blood vessels, whereas ongoing sleep deficiency puts us at risk for a number of conditions. One study on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) website said, "Teenagers showed that with each hour of sleep lost, the odds of becoming obese went up. Sleep deficiency increases the risk of obesity in other age groups as well. The damage from sleep deficiency can occur in an instant (such as a car crash), or it can harm you over time. For example, ongoing sleep deficiency can raise your risk for some chronic health problems. It also can affect how well you think, react, work, learn, and get along with others. Sleep helps maintain a healthy balance of the hormones that make you feel hungry (ghrelin) or full (leptin). When you don't get enough sleep, your level of ghrelin goes up and your level of leptin goes down. This makes you feel hungrier than when you're well-rested. Sleep also affects how your body reacts to insulin, the hormone that controls your blood glucose (sugar) level. Sleep deficiency results in a higher than normal blood sugar level, which may increase your risk for diabetes."

In an abstract titled "What Makes You Sleep?" the NIH points out, "Many factors play a role in preparing your body to fall asleep and wake up. You have an internal 'body clock' that controls when you're awake and when your body is ready for sleep. The body clock typically has a 24-hour repeating rhythm (called the circadian rhythm). Two processes interact to control this rhythm. The first is a pressure to sleep that builds with every hour that you're awake. This drive for sleep reaches a peak in the evening, when most people fall asleep. A compound called adenosine seems to be one factor linked to this drive for sleep. While you're awake, the level of adenosine in your brain continues to rise. The increasing level of this compound signals a shift toward sleep. While you sleep, your body breaks down adenosine.

"A second process involves your internal body clock. This clock is in sync with certain cues in the environment. Light, darkness, and other cues help determine when you feel awake and when you feel drowsy. For example, light signals received through your eyes tell a special area in your brain that it is daytime. When it gets dark, your body releases a hormone called melatonin. Melatonin signals your body that it's time to prepare for sleep, and it helps you feel drowsy. The amount of melatonin in your bloodstream peaks as the evening wears on and this peak is an important part of preparing your body for sleep."

Having all this information, I decide to implement changes to my sleep pattern. It was very difficult going from being a night owl to finding my way to bed early (by 10p.m.), as this had become so foreign to me, but recalling middle and high school my bedtimes were between 8:00p.m - 9:30 p.m. Sleeping better and longer helped me feel and look better than I had in years. I did this by making sleep time special and soothing and my bedroom became my peaceful sanctuary. I always thought that I could function well on little sleep, but I was wrong; I learned that it was about getting quality sleep at the right times.

Sleeping when your body is ready to sleep and sleeping the recommended hours are very important, shown in this chart:

We all face challenges with getting enough sleep especially shift workers, caregivers, travelling executives, small business owners, and new parents, but I encourage you to try to reconnect with our old friend sleep and seek ways for a restful night.

Our days reflect how we slept the night before, so how are you sleeping?

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Age	Recommended Amount of Sleep
Newborns	16–18 hours a day
Preschool-aged children	11–12 hours a day
School-aged children	10 + hours a day
Teens	9–10 hours a day
Adults (including the elderly)	7–8 hours a day