A Good Night's Rest

Many people don't realize the benefits of a good night's sleep. Sleep can affect much more than your grumpy mood after a sleepless night; it can affect your overall health and well-being.

A good night's sleep can be one of the easiest and most important things you can do to improve your health. Studies show that lack of sleep is associated with higher blood pressure and cholesterol values, which could increase your risk for heart disease and stroke. When your body is sleep deprived it can increase levels of stress as well. Stress can negatively affect your health as it can cause your blood pressure to rise and your body to release even more stress hormones, which can cause increased inflammation in the body. Sleep can also make you more alert, improve your memory, reduce your risk for depression, and is critical for body rejuvenation.

Obviously sleep is important! And I'm not just talking about how much sleep you may get a night, most people know they are supposed to get 7-8 hours of shut-eye every night. I'm talking about the quality of the sleep you are getting. You know the old saying, "Quality over quantity"? Well that applies to sleep as well. Getting 10 hours of poor sleep isn't going to make you feel nearly as good as 8 hours of quality sleep.

So, how do you get quality sleep to experience all of these health benefits? It starts with a routine. Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time everyday, even weekends! This helps calibrate your body's internal clock. After a couple nights you will begin to feel sleepy at the same time each night and may even start waking up without an alarm clock in the mornings.

Another important tip is to be smart about naps. While they are a great way to make up sleep you may have lost, try to limit your naps to about 20 minutes in the afternoon, as any longer may leave you having a hard time falling asleep that night and disrupting your internal clock. Another important tip for improving quality sleep is to get regular exercise. Regular exercise has many more benefits than just improving the symptoms of insomnia and increasing the amount of time you spend in a deep sleep. It can help improve your health in a variety of ways including diabetes management, weight loss, blood pressure control, and increased muscle strength, just to name a few! While all of these benefits are great, it is important to watch what time you are exercising as activity in the evenings or at night can interfere with sleep. This is also a time where you want to watch what foods and products you are eating and drinking, such as caffeine, which can leave you staring at the ceiling unable to drift off to sleep. For weight loss, it is recommended to eat your last meal at 6 pm and no later. This is because the body has a hard time metabolizing what you eat when you are sleeping. As a general rule, keep sleep and eating at least 3 hours apart.

It is also important when you are trying to fall asleep to control your exposure to light. TV and computer screens can interfere with your body's production of melatonin- an important hormone that regulates your sleep-wake cycle. It is important to avoid the blue light emitted from your phone, computer, and TV screens within 1-2 hours of your bedtime. If you like to read a book before bed, be sure to use as little light as necessary to do so, including on devices such as e-readers or books on your phone. While limiting light exposure is important when you are trying to fall asleep, the opposite is true for waking up in the mornings. Try to sleep where sunlight can reach you in the mornings. This light will make waking up in the mornings much easier and feel more natural. If you sleep where light can't reach you in the mornings, there are devices that simulate sunshine such as light therapy boxes that can be helpful.

Other options are available such as prescription or over-the-counter medications. While these products work great for those who need them, they should be used only as a necessity, and especially only after you have incorporated the tips listed above.

Though all of these tips can be useful to improve your health and sleep habits, they do no good if you don't use them! It may be hard at first to implement these routines. However, if you work hard and stay consistent, sleep will come much easier each night and mornings will feel like a peaceful awakening. The end result could be a change in your day-to-day mood, as well as the numerous health benefits that accompany a good night's sleep.
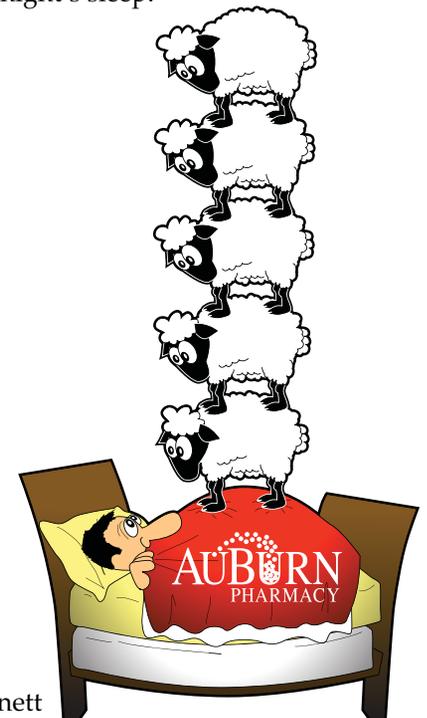
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