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BEDTIME MYTHS *debunked*

“Counting sheep will make you sleep”

“I’ll sleep when I retire”

“Hit snooze to keep the dream alive”

Wrong, wrong and wrong again! We delve into the folklore surrounding those elusive hours of precious shuteye and put common tales to bed once and for all

HITTING SNOOZE... WILL LEAVE YOU BETTER RESTED AND MORE ENERGISED

If 'tap to snooze' is the most commonly used button on your phone, you're a woman after our own hearts! Just five more minutes and we're sure to rise bright-eyed, bushy tailed and ready to conquer, right? Unfortunately, no. Science has spoken out on the matter and we've (reluctantly) taken note. As it happens, hitting snooze will actually leave you more tired because you're depriving yourself of the kind of sleep that really matters.

Snoozers typically have erratic wake-up times. They might sleep in for 10 minutes one day and 45 minutes the next. As a result, the body is unable to predict a consistent rhythm. This prevents your wake-up hormones from being released at the correct time, causing the painful struggle of opening your eyes come morning.

You also have to consider that when you drift back off after waking, you're essentially starting a brand new sleep cycle. When your alarm sounds for the second time, your body is expecting it even less than the first occurrence, leaving you in a hazy, groggy state that can last up to four hours!

The bottom line? If you snooze, you really do lose. Try setting your alarm for the latest possible time, and indulge in the restorative, uninterrupted sleep you truly crave.



COUNTING SHEEP... WILL MAKE YOU SLEEP

It may be the age-old method of catching a few Zs, but can conjuring up images of fluffy farm animals really get you to the land of nod? Mary Dalglish, vice-president of the Federation of Holistic Therapists (fht.org.uk) says: "A study by Oxford University showed that insomniacs who visualised relaxing scenes got to sleep 20 minutes faster than those counting sheep. The verdict was that enumerating animals was just too mundane to effectively keep worries and distracting thoughts at bay. Instead, try picturing an ongoing scene: waves crashing onto the shore or a winding river making its way downhill. If you find it difficult to dream up vivid visualisations, aromatherapy can be a great help. A few drops of lavender, chamomile or neroli essential oils can instantly transport you to tranquil springtime fields, plus they're each proven to relieve anxiety and tension when inhaled."



Neom Tranquillity Scented Candle, £45, neomorganics.com



Pukka Night Time Tea, £2.45, hollandandbarrett.com



Base Formula Soothing Overnight Mask, £12, baseformula.com

EIGHT HOURS... OF SLEEP IS A LUXURY, SIX IS REALITY

Margaret Thatcher famously remarked that she needed just four hours of sleep in order to function properly. While there may have been some truth to this (scientists have discovered that two percent of the population carry a gene that allows them to get by on a minimal amount of sleep), it's far more likely that the former prime minister was guilty of burning the candle at both ends.

Eight hours should not be seen as luxury, but as a necessary part of your health and wellbeing. In fact, sleep experts agree that the average adult needs around nine hours for optimum performance, happiness and safety. Even if you don't feel sleepy, when you haven't had adequate sleep your brain doesn't work as well as it could. You may not realise it, but you don't think or react as quickly as you would if you were well-rested.

A HOT BATH... WILL PUT INSOMNIA TO BED

Hands up if you believed that a hot bath was a sure-fire way of promoting slumber? Us too! For years, we've spent restless evenings steeping lavender and chamomile essential oils in a steaming tub. Turns out we were way off beat, however. A sizzling bath may relax the mind (the heat dominates your awareness, forcing out other thoughts), but it's also very stimulating for the nervous system. When you emerge from the water, you may feel sluggish for a moment as your body temperature normalises. But as this subsides, you'll find yourself more alert than ever. You're on fire neurologically; your senses livened by the sudden introduction to heat. If sleep is your aim, you're better off bathing a few degrees above body temperature or reserving sauna climes for the early evening at least three hours before bedtime.



A. Vogel Dormeasan Sleep Valerian-Hops Oral Drops, £9.75, avogel.co.uk



Holistic Silk Limited Edition Pineapple Eye Mask, £52, holisticsilk.com



This Works Deep Sleep Bath Oil, £80, thisworks.com

IF ALL ELSE FAILS, TRY AN ALCOHOLIC NIGHTCAP

You may take comfort in the fact that your head barely has to touch the pillow after sipping on a stiff drink, but this is only half of the story. Yes, alcohol is a natural sedative, but the chemicals produced as your body metabolises it actually disrupt your sleep cycle.

Rob Hobson, head of nutrition at Healthspan (healthspan.co.uk), says: "Having a glass of wine in the evening **may** seem like a good way to help you to relax but, once the bottle is open, one glass can quickly become two or more, which is not a good habit to get into. Overdoing the wine can also leave you dehydrated during the night causing you to wake up when the body needs water. There's something in the old wife's tale of warm milk, which contains calcium (a muscle relaxant) and also tryptophan, which is used to synthesise melatonin (the hormone that controls the sleep-wake cycle). Tryptophan does require carbohydrates for uptake, so try adding a little bit of honey or cocoa powder, which also contains the natural relaxant, magnesium and mood enhancer, phenylethylamine."

EXERCISE... WILL HELP YOU TO DRIFT OFF

Common sense tells us that an intense workout will leave us exhausted and consequently desperate to jump into bed. Insomniacs have even been known to run miles before bed in an attempt to tire themselves out. The relationship between physical activity and sleep is a lot more complicated than many people realise, however. It's true that people who exercise regularly sleep more soundly, but the regular part is paramount. Exercising now again can make it difficult to drift off because the body is not expecting the stimulation. Timing is also important, but not in the way that you might think. Physical activity raises your core body temperature, which is counter-productive in terms of sleep. Your ability to switch off depends on the time it takes you to cool down. This can take as long as six hours or as quick as one. You just have to figure out how your body responds.



Aromatherapy Associates Deep Relax Balm, £19, aromatherapyassociates.com



Puressentiel Relax Blend for Diffusion, £11.89, amazon.com

YOU CAN CATCH UP... ON REST AT THE WEEKEND

If your weekly engagements have you rising early and sleeping late, it's likely that you're incurring a substantial amount of sleep debt. A common misconception is that you can make up for lost time when the weekend comes around. If only it were that simple! Researchers have found that while one long night of sleep can bring performance levels back to a normal standard, the effect only lasts for six hours upon waking. That means you can expect a major slump in the late-afternoon that you won't be able to recover from. A consistent bedtime routine is the only way to go to ensure steady energy.

IF YOU CAN'T... GET TO SLEEP, PERSISTENCE IS YOUR BEST BET

It might sound counter-intuitive, but if you're struggling to drift off, it may help to actually remove yourself from the bed. Tossing and turning to no avail will increase anxiety, promoting associations between your bed and unrest. The trick is to remain relaxed as you remove yourself from the sheets. Avoid bright light (especially the blue rays that emit from phones, tablets and televisions) as this can trigger a reduction in your sleep-producing hormones. Instead, try soothing relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and meditation.

