

Rest & Recovery: How To Get Enough Quality Sleep (And Why It's Important)

When starting on a fitness journey or trying to break through a stubborn plateau, we often zero in on making specific diet and training adjustments. We know that rest and recovery are important aspects of any training program, but it goes beyond stretching, foam rolling, post-workout supplements, and taking well-timed rest days. These things are undoubtedly critical, but there's another part of the equation that's often overlooked: quality sleep.

Sleep, it turns out, can have a major impact not only on your workout performance, but on your overall health and well-being. Read on to learn more about what happens during sleep, how to sleep better, and get answers to common questions like how long it takes to enter each sleep stage, the value of mid-day naps, and the myth of make-up sleep.

The Science of Sleep

There's increasing evidence that suggests sleep should be considered a critical component of any training program given its impact on athletic performance. Before we get into those benefits, let's take a look at what happens when you sleep.

While You Were Sleeping

According to [Johns Hopkins sleep expert](#) and neurologist Mark Wu, "sleep is a period during which the brain is engaged in a number of activities necessary to life—which are closely linked to quality of life." Sleep is regulated by your circadian rhythm and sleep drive, and when asleep your brain cycles through two different types: REM (rapid-eye movement) and non-REM; each cycle lasts roughly 90 minutes.

The first cycle is non-REM, which is the most restorative phase that's critical for learning and memory. It includes four stages: you fall asleep (stage 1), then your heart rate and breathing slow, your temperature drops, and your metabolism regulates itself during light sleep (stage 2), then you enter the third and fourth stages of deep sleep.

Deep sleep is where your body does a lot of rebuilding, secreting the growth hormone associated with cellular repair.

REM sleep is where dreams are made, and the body is temporarily paralyzed as our brain waves become more active like they are when we're awake. We cycle through the two sleep phases an average of 4-5 times a night.

The thing about sleep cycles and stages is that, while each cycle usually lasts around 90 minutes, your body doesn't spend an equal amount of time in each stage every time it cycles through. "Each cycle lasts 90 minutes on average, but some cycles can be as short as 50 minutes and some can be as long as 100 minutes or more," [says Michael Grander](#), MD.

According to Grander, the first stage is "usually just a quick transition [into light sleep]." You also quickly go from light sleep into deep sleep, which typically starts 35-45 minutes after falling asleep. You'll stay in deep sleep for a while until going into approximately 10 minutes of REM. Your second sleep cycle is characterized by more light sleep, a little less deep sleep than before, and a bit more REM, and this trend continues with each cycle. During the second half of the night, your body mostly alternates between light sleep and REM until you wake up.

The Benefits

We know that a lot of body maintenance and repair happens during sleep, but studies also show that ensuring quality sleep can have a great impact on [a number of areas](#) related to your physical performance while awake.

Besides improving your overall health, good sleep can:

- Reduce injury rates
- Improve reaction times
- Extend lifespan of your physical vitality
- Improve accuracy
- Decrease your sprint time
- Decrease amount of mental mistakes you make

The inverse is also true, where not getting the sleep you need can have [a grossly negative impact](#) on your performance and overall physical and mental health.

Get Better At Sleeping

You may be thinking: can I really do much to impact how well I sleep? Studies seem to say yes. And the good news is, you're already doing something that's been proven to be an adequate intervention for people who don't get enough quality sleep: [working out](#).

If you're struggling to get the restful, restorative sleep you need and have [ruled out a sleep disorder](#), here are some ways to optimize your nighttime z's.

Upgrade Your Mattress

While the literature is inconclusive, there is strong evidence that suggests the type and characteristics of a mattress can improve spinal alignment and quality of sleep. [A systematic review](#) of trials published since 2000 show that a mattress subjectively deemed medium-firm with supportive foam layers and designed with temperature control in mind can promote sleep comfort, quality, and spinal alignment.

In other words, choosing the right mattress can have a profound effect on how well your body is able to fall and stay in the necessary stages of sleep. Just like light and sound, your mattress is an external stimulus.

When it comes to people who experience chronic muscle pain and soreness (read: people who workout), the [National Sleep Foundation](#) recommends memory foam mattresses, such as those offered by the trending mattress-in-a-box companies. After conducting experiments testing spinal alignment and the body's natural temperature fluctuations that occur during sleep, Casper engineers designed [their line of mattresses](#) with open-cell foam to increase circulation and air flow, mitigating any heat retention sometimes associated with memory foam.

Establish a Sleep Schedule

Studies also show [a compelling correlation](#) between an irregular bedtime schedule and not enough sleep and poor quality sleep. During the week, aim to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

It's also highly recommended that you maintain this sleep schedule through the weekend. However, if you do happen to lose 5 or so hours of sleep during the week, [some doctors say](#) you can make up for that on the weekend, but not if you lose something like 20 hours or more. It's also important to remember that the body has its own sleep deficit recovery system, so a consistent schedule is more important than factoring in any kind of "make-up sleep."

Nap Strategically

For some of us, training goals can mean losing sleep in the mornings or evenings, and [some studies suggest](#) that napping can help improve mental and physical performance in people with partial sleep loss. A post-lunch nap, for example, improved alertness, short-term memory, and sprint times.

However, the National Sleep Foundation says that naps do not make up for inadequate or poor quality sleep, and napping for more than 30 minutes later in the day can actually throw off your night's sleep by decreasing [your body's sleep drive](#).

For recovering from fatigue, aim for a short, 5-20 minute nap. The farther along you get in your sleep cycle during a nap, the more groggy you'll feel after waking up.

Sleep, it's the new recovery.