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SLEEP STAGES AND THE IMPACT ON YOUR HEALTH

Sleep is more than just a way to rest; it's essential to how your body and brain function. Quality sleep supports healing, mental clarity, immune strength and emotional balance. But many people don't realize that sleep isn't a single state. It's a dynamic process comprising several stages that each uniquely contributes to your recovery and well-being.

This article explores the different stages of sleep, how much of each you need and what you can do to improve your sleep for better health.

The Stages of Sleep

Your body cycles through different sleep stages in roughly 90-minute intervals throughout the night. According to the Mayo Clinic, these stages are divided into two main types: non-REM (NREM) sleep and REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. On average, adults typically need about seven to nine hours of sleep per night and, ideally, go through four to six complete sleep cycles during that time.

Each stage has a specific purpose, and missing out on one can leave you feeling groggy, foggy or even physically unwell.

Non-REM Sleep

NREM sleep consists of three stages, progressing from light to deep, restorative sleep:

- **Stage 1, Light Sleep (N1)**—This is the brief transition between wakefulness and sleep. It typically lasts just a few minutes. During this

stage, your heart rate and breathing begin to slow down, and muscle activity decreases. You may experience slight twitches or sensations of falling. Although not very restorative, Stage 1 sets the foundation for deeper sleep.

- **Stage 2, Onset of Real Sleep (N2)**—Stage 2 is the largest portion of your total sleep time, about 40% to 50%. Stage 2 is crucial for memory consolidation and overall physical relaxation. It prepares you for the deeper, more restorative sleep that follows. During this phase, brain waves slow down, and bursts of activity called “sleep spindles” occur. Body temperature drops, and heart rate and breathing continue to slow.
- **Stage 3, Deep Sleep (N3)**—Also known as slow-wave sleep or delta sleep, this is the most restorative stage. It typically accounts for 15% to 20% of your sleep and occurs more frequently in the first half of the night. In this stage, brain waves are at their slowest. The body repairs tissues, builds muscle and strengthens the immune system. It can be difficult to wake someone from this stage. Skipping deep sleep can lead to poor physical recovery, weakened immunity and increased fatigue the next day.



REM Sleep

REM sleep usually starts about 90 minutes after you fall asleep and recurs several times during the night, becoming longer with each cycle. It makes up about 20% to 25% of your total sleep time.

This stage is where dreams most often occur. Your brain becomes highly active, but your muscles remain relaxed and paralyzed to prevent you from acting out your dreams. REM sleep is essential for:

- Emotional regulation
- Learning and memory consolidation
- Creativity and problem-solving

Disrupted or insufficient REM sleep has been linked to mood disorders, reduced cognitive performance and increased risk of chronic illness.

Understanding Sleep Stage Impact On Your Health

Each individual may spend different amounts of time in each zone. For example, as people age, they will generally spend less time in deep sleep.

Many people use a sleep tracker or smartwatch to learn more about how much time they spend in each sleep stage. These devices can track sleep and sleep stages, although experts warn that their accuracy may vary.

In some cases, such as to diagnose sleep apnea or snoring, a health care provider may recommend an at-home or in-lab sleep test to fully understand your sleep patterns.

Tips to Improve Your Sleep

If you're not getting enough deep or REM sleep or struggling to stay asleep, your body may not be getting the full benefits of rest. The following are some practical steps you can take:

- **Stick to a consistent sleep schedule.** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on the weekends.
- **Create a relaxing bedtime routine.** Limit screen time, reduce exposure to bright lights, and consider gentle stretching or reading.

- **Keep your bedroom cool, dark and quiet.** If necessary, use blackout curtains, earplugs or a white noise machine.
- **Avoid caffeine, alcohol and large meals close to bedtime.** These can interfere with your ability to fall and stay asleep.
- **Stay active during the day.** Regular exercise can help regulate your sleep-wake cycle, but avoid vigorous activity close to bedtime.

For More Information

Sleep isn't just about getting enough hours of it; you need to get the right kind of sleep. Each stage plays a critical role in how your body heals, how your brain processes information and how you feel overall. By understanding and respecting your sleep cycles and supporting better sleep habits, you give your body a chance to restore itself and function at its best.

Contact a health care professional to learn more.