

# PhysioBiz

Health newsflashes

for bodies busy moving, working, playing, being.



## Sleep – vital to our health

**Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!**

How are you sleeping? Not so great? It's only when the careless, casual sleep of youth and adolescence abandons us, when we toss and turn and lie staring at the ceiling night after night, that we realise how precious sleep is – in a famous Shakespearian speech, Macbeth called it “sore labour’s bath,

Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,

Chief nourisher in life’s feast”.

Chief nourisher? Yes, that has a ring of truth. Sleep is crucial to good health. Research over the years has linked sleep deprivation to:

- impaired cognitive performance (that’s brain fog for us plebs) and impaired alertness
- poor mood (many people experience irritability and downright bad temper after nights of poor sleep; for many, depression is triggered by sleep deprivation)
- impaired metabolism of blood sugar (linked to Type 2 Diabetes and weight gain)
- impairment of our natural mechanisms of appetite regulation (in fact, the impact of sleep deprivation on weight issues is so profound that many now consider that programmes for weight loss and maintenance should include aiming for good sleep as a priority)
- a deterioration of immune system functioning
- accidents – sleepy people who are not alert are behind a lot of vehicle accidents and workplace accidents
- dampening of your sex drive
- aging skin – yes really! Lack of sleep triggers changes in several hormones (like the stress hormone, cortisol) which affect the skin. 1 and 2

Not good, right?

And yet so many people living modern lifestyles are sleeping too little and badly. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the USA estimates that nearly one-third of adults “sleep less than the recommended seven hours per night needed to maintain optimal health”.

Instead, they spend their nights in the quiet bedroom, phone in hand, trawling Google for advice and tips, like no caffeine or other stimulants after noon, good sleep hygiene and

supplements such as melatonin. Many of us simply give in and ask our doctors for “something to help me sleep, please”.

### **Get moving!**

There is one solution that your physiotherapist would urge you to consider: exercise.

“There is a large body of research that shows a positive impact of exercise on sleep,” says the president of the South African Society of Physiotherapy, Professor Witness Mudzi. “A recently published review of many studies, for example, showed that ‘exercise promoted increased sleep efficiency and duration regardless of the mode and intensity of activity’ especially for the middle-aged and older people.”

The wonderful thing about this finding is that wording: ‘regardless of the mode and intensity of activity’. In other words, you don’t have to do high-intensity exercise or aim for ultra-marathon fitness: you can just embark on a programme of light to moderate exercise, today. Take the stairs instead of the lift, or go for a walk at lunchtime instead of ordering in a sandwich or burger.

“Even ten minutes of aerobic exercise a day can help with sleep,” says Professor Mudzi. “The important thing is to do it regularly – and at a time that suits your own body. For most people, this will be in the early morning.”

### **Pain and sleep**

Chronic pain is another factor that impacts on sleep. It cuts both ways: those with pain are more likely to have insomnia, and those with insomnia are more likely to have more negative experiences of pain.

“Understanding and managing pain is critical to good sleep patterns,” says Professor Mudzi. “Talk openly to your physiotherapist about your personal experiences; you’ll find she or he is well-equipped to help you improve your sleep.”

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