6 SLEEP MYTHS that make you TIRED

If you’re among the one in three who has trouble sleeping, we’re here to set a few things straight about the myths that could be keeping you awake.

**MYTH** Napping can make you more tired

**TRUTH** It’s all about how long you nap for. A power nap of five to 20 minutes unloads the brain and could make up for a small sleep debt from the night before, according to Dr Nerina Ramia Khan, a physiologist specialising in sleep, and author of Tired But Wired (Souvenir Press). But after 20 minutes, the brain may move into its deeper slow-wave sleep, leaving you groggy when you wake up.

**SOLUTION** Be ruthless and limit a nap to no more than 20 minutes. And don’t nap after 3pm, as this is when your body’s levels of the sleep hormone melatonin begin to rise, signalling to the brain that it’s time to wind down. Napping after this time could interrupt your night’s sleep.

**MYTH** Skipping an hour’s sleep each night can’t hurt you

**TRUTH** An experiment by television medic Dr Michael Mosley found that those who had an hour’s less shut-eye than normal struggled with mental agility tests the following day. More alarmingly, after a week, blood tests revealed that processes in their bodies associated with inflammation, immune response and stress became more active. In addition, there were even increases in the activity of genes associated with cancer and diabetes risk. However, in people who slept an extra hour, the process was reversed.

**SOLUTION** It’s easy to find your ordinary bedtime edges ever later when watching TV and spending time on your laptop but, says Dr Jessamy Hibberd, a consultant psychologist and co-author of This Book Will Make You Sleep (Quercus), electronic devices and energy-efficient light bulbs emit blue light waves, which signal to the brain that it’s still daytime. The answer is to impose an “electronic sundown” of 60 minutes in which you switch off phones, tablets and laptops before bed and keep your pre-bed light exposure to a minimum.
MYTH Exercising close to bedtime keeps you awake
TRUTH In fact, even vigorous exercise before bedtime doesn’t cause sleep problems for many people and, according to new research by The Sleep Council, it might even be beneficial.
SOLUTION “As long as you wind down, exercising shouldn’t affect your sleep,” says Dr Ramilakhan. She recommends downloading yoga moves. “My favourite is Child’s Pose,” she says, “where you kneel down and rest your chest on your thighs and your head on the floor, followed by Legs up the Wall and Corpse Pose. Hold each for up to five minutes, accompanied by deep, slow breathing – it’s the ultimate pre-bed relaxation routine.”

MYTH If you have insomnia, go to bed earlier
TRUTH Insomnia affects a third of us, with worry and stress keeping most of us awake at night. A classic mistake is to go to bed too early.
SOLUTION Build up your “sleep pressure” says Professor Colin Espie, a sleep specialist at the University of Oxford, which is about being active enough to make yourself truly tired. The less you care about sleep, the more likely it is to happen, adds Dr Hibberd. If you wake in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep, start to think about this as a good thing, time to chill out in your warm bed and relax. Eating foods during the day that increase your levels of sleep neurotransmitters is also worth trying. These include wholegrain breads, fruit (especially bananas and cherries) and protein-rich foods including beef, salmon, herring, pork and turkey.

MYTH Some people only need a few hours
TRUTH True, Margaret Thatcher and Winston Churchill famously thrived on less sleep, but they’re a rarity. Most of us need seven to eight hours. How do the brief-sleep people manage? “Sleep is genetically determined,” says sleep expert Dr Neil Stanley. So if your mum or dad were short sleepers, you may be too.
Researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, discovered a gene mutation in some people that predisposed them to needing about 20 per cent less sleep than the rest of us. But they account for around only five per cent of the population.
SOLUTION Recognise the signs you’re not getting enough sleep, such as cravings for sweets, caffeine and carbs, and wanting to go back to sleep as soon as you wake up. Conversely, if you wake up without an alarm at the same time every day – with only four or five hours’ sleep – you could be among the few genuine “short sleepers”.

MYTH Catching up at the weekend is fine
TRUTH The long weekend lie-in may seem like a tempting antidote to a week of late nights, but recent research found that those who were sleep-deprived had impaired concentration even after their “recovery sleep” at the weekend. “Lie-ins and long naps at the weekend disrupt our body clocks, making it harder to sleep at night during the week,” says Professor Espie.
SOLUTION If you miss some sleep one night, you can catch up the next night with little problem, says Dr Stanley. But two or more nights can’t be remedied by a weekend lie-in. Instead, getting into the habit of waking up at the same time every day, even at the weekend, will train your body to use the time it has to get the best night’s sleep.

5 BEST SLEEP APPS

SLEEP CYCLE ALARM CLOCK
Wakes you up when you’re in light sleep – the best phase to wake up in. Choose from 15 different alarm melodies or choose your own song on iTunes. Sleep Cycle Alarm Clock, £1.49, iTunes.

HYPNOSIS – SLEEP SOUNDLY
Hypnosis sessions that include guided imagery and relaxation techniques that create “theta waves” (relaxing brainwaves) in the brain. Free, iTunes.

DEEP SLEEP
Clinical hypnotherapist Andrew Johnson brings his miracle-working directly to your smartphone through a relaxing, guided meditation designed to aid a good night’s rest. £1.99, iTunes.

SLEEPBOT
Tracks movement and sounds (so it can track any sleep-talking or snoring!) to paint a visual picture of your sleep in graphs and stats the next day. Plus, it suggests sleep promoting moves and food choices for before bed. Free, iTunes.

SLEEP PILLOW
Provides a set of high-quality ambient sounds designed to create a relaxed environment that helps you nod off. It features 70 naturally recorded sounds including white noise and animal sounds, a slow-fade alarm clock and a sleeper fade-out timer. £1.49, iTunes.

SLEEP WELL, KEEP ALERT
Early research suggests that poor sleep may even be linked to Alzheimer’s. Recent studies found that the fewer hours people slept, the more likely they were to have higher levels of a harmful protein (beta-amyloid), which accumulates in the brains of those with Alzheimer’s. w&h