

Sleep and Aging

How we snooze depends on how old we are.

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published October 30, 2009

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Ah, sleeping like a baby for eight solid hours. Sounds like a dream, doesn't it? That's because it is. Unless you are a baby, the only place you're going to sleep like one is in your dreams.

Sorry to be the bearer of such shocking news, but it's true. Sleep patterns change ever so slightly at certain points in life, and most adults simply don't hit that deep, deep stage of sleep that babies, kids and teens enjoy. And we're not supposed to.

"It is normal to not get this [type of sleep], and you can't do anything to get it back," says Marilyn L. Rudin, M.D., medical director of the Sleep Center at Meridian Park Hospital in Tualatin, Ore.



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Why? Well, extremely deep sleep is there to help with growth and development. Adults don't need to grow and develop (at least not physically), so this type of sleep is not necessary. Age 20 is the typical cut-off point (not that it just ends all of sudden on your 20th birthday, but it will start to slow down and decrease around this time), says Lisa Shives, M.D., medical director of Northshore Sleep Medicine in Evanston, Ill. After that, you'll just cruise along for several decades without any significant change.

Adult Sleep

Not that your adult-life sleep won't be restful. Barring any problems, the type of sleep adults get is the type of sleep adults need. This means spending the majority of your night in what Shives calls normal, non-REM sleep (a.k.a. stage two), along with some light sleep (this is where you are drifting off and are easily awakened) and some REM sleep (REM stands for rapid eye movement, the sleep stage in which vivid dreams occur).

Sleep-pattern change is possible, though, for folks in their mid-60s. Not so much because the typical retiree needs a different kind of sleep, but because this is also the stage in life where age-related problems that affect sleep start to show up.

"When you are older you get more illnesses, so you wake up," Rudin says. "Your bladder wakes you up and your pain wakes you up, so your sleep is fragmented."

While a random fragmented night is no big deal, it can be problematic if it becomes chronic. You'll be spending too much time in the light sleep stage and not enough in stage two. The lack of quality sleep can accumulate, and you'll start to frequently feel tired throughout the day, which can exacerbate illnesses and make sleeping problems even worse. Throw in regular use of sleep aids and suddenly you've got a disaster on your hands. These meds leave many people in a fog all day, Rudin says, which can lead to a variety of consequences. Not only that, but poor sleep significantly increases one's risk for cardiovascular problems, Shives explains, and it is also associated with other chronic issues such as diabetes, depression and pulmonary disease.

To Nap, or Not to Nap?

Will a nap help? Rudin says no. In fact, she discourages naps because midday sleep can make it even harder to sleep at night.

Ideally, Rudin says, the typical non-elderly adult should aim for seven and a half to eight hours of sleep per night. Teens need nine, younger kids need nine or 10, and babies, of course, should sleep the majority of the day away. Elderly folks, she adds, do require a bit more sleep than their younger counterparts. Just a tad more, though, so if your 85-year-old gramps is sleeping 12 hours a day, the two of you should consult his doctor. This, however, is not an official sleep pattern change—it's simply because they are likely to tire more easily

(and in their case, short naps are actually OK).

If the amount of time you're sleeping differs from these guidelines, don't panic, says Rudin. Every person is different, and some don't need as much sleep. But, she urges anyone who feels lethargic, is frequently up all night, or simply has questions or concerns about their own sleep patterns or cycles to visit a medical doctor who specializes in sleep. You may have a sleep disorder or another medical problem that's keeping you from hitting all three stages of sleep throughout the night, and a sleep specialist can work with you to correct the problem. No, you're never going to sleep like a baby again--but you just might be able to enjoy some refreshing stage-two snoozing.

"And if you learn you are normal, that relieves a huge burden," Rudin says. "You can stop worrying." And hopefully, sleep soundly at night.

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