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Sleep and the Weight Loss Connection

Over the years, our lives have become more hectic and fast-paced than ever before. We are working to earn a living, taking care of our homes, raising children, trying to socialize and still have time for ourselves. We are constantly being bombarded with external stimuli, from television and computers, to phones and PDAs. Many of us are so accustomed to giving and receiving information instantly that we forget to slow down and reflect on ourselves. Our diets are full of sugar, caffeine and processed foods, and more and more, our emotional health and physical activity seem to take a back seat. We are left feeling exhausted before bed, while not waking feeling refreshed.

Sleep is required for repair and rejuvenation. Allowing our bodies to shut down and rebuild on a nightly basis enable us to begin each day with energy and enthusiasm. Making an effort to improve your sleep habits can enhance your quality of life and give you the motivation you need to achieve your weight loss goals.

Cortisol and Weight Gain:

Unhealthy sleep habits can have a harmful impact on carbohydrate metabolism because of its effect on blood sugar regulation. This leaves us at risk of fat gain, especially around the mid section. Cortisol is the stress hormone. When we are sleep deprived, cortisol levels become elevated. When this occurs, the following areas suffer:

- Appetite – can make you feel hungry even when you have eaten enough;
- Raises blood sugar and insulin levels – causes you to crave carbohydrates unnecessarily;
- Regular sleep patterns – makes it difficult to fall or stay asleep when you finally get to bed.

Leptin and Weight Gain:

Sleep affects your hormonal balance, which is necessary for effective weight loss. This is particularly true of leptin, the hormone that controls your appetite. This is why your sleep habits should be just as much of a priority as your nutrition plan and exercise routines.

- Leptin is produced by the fat cells and acts as a signal to the brain, allowing us to determine when we are feeling full or when we should continue to eat.
- Leptin levels naturally increase when we are sleeping, and drop off when we are sleep deprived.
- When leptin levels decrease, we may feel excessively hungry and the chances of overeating are increased.

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Lifestyle Habits to Improve Sleep Patterns:

- Follow these lifestyle habits for at least 2-3 weeks before considering a natural sleep aid.
- Try to sleep a minimum of seven to a maximum of nine hours of sleep per night. Oversleeping can be as detrimental as sleep deprivation.
- Establish regular sleep hours. Try to go to bed and wake up in the morning around the same time every day, even on the weekends.
- Go to bed before 11:00 pm, preferably by 10:00 pm. Our stress glands, the adrenals, recharge between the hours of 11:00 pm-1:00 am.
- Avoid using a loud alarm clock. Waking up suddenly can be a shock to your body. If you are regularly getting enough sleep an alarm clock should be unnecessary. Sleeping though an alarm or requiring an alarm daily indicates you may be sleep deprived. If you do use an alarm, you should awake just before it goes off.
- Sleep in complete darkness. Your room should be as dark as possible to maintain melatonin balance.
- Do not turn on the light if you go to the bathroom during the night. Turning on the light, even for just a second, shuts down melatonin production and can contribute to sleep deprivation or insomnia.
- Turn on the lights or open the blinds as soon as you wake. Allow the daylight and the sounds of the morning to stimulate and wake the brain. This helps to reset your body clock and ensures that your melatonin levels remain on 'awake' until the evening.
- Ensure adequate exposure to daylight by spending time outside during the day. This also helps to regulate the day and night's natural cycle on the brain.
- Try not to nap during the day or early evening. If you must nap, sleep for no longer than 30 minutes, maximum.
- At night, do not work past the point of feeling drowsy. If you're feeling sleepy while watching television, using the computer or reading, go to bed!

How to Use Nutrition to Improve Sleep:

- Avoid raising your blood sugar levels at night. Try not to eat in the two hour period before going to bed. If you're feeling hungry, choose a snack that contains protein because it is a source of the amino acid, tryptophan. We convert tryptophan into serotonin and melatonin, which are the hormones important for sleep. The sugars from fruit may also help tryptophan reach the brain more easily.
- Do not drink fluids two hours before going to bed. This will reduce the likelihood of needing to urinate during the night.
- Avoid caffeine. In addition to coffee, tea and soft drinks, chocolate also contains caffeine. A dose of caffeine usually takes 15 to 30 minutes to take effect and lasts for four to five hours. In some, caffeine metabolism may last longer - even more reason to avoid caffeine. Caffeine may also have a negative effect on the natural release cycle of the stress hormone, cortisol. If this pattern is disrupted, you may have difficulty sleeping or falling

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back to sleep after waking.

- Avoid alcohol. Although alcohol makes you drowsy, the effect is short-lived. The body metabolizes alcohol as you sleep, resulting in symptoms that can cause sleep interruption. Alcohol may cause sleep disorders because it seems to affect the brain chemicals that influence sleep. It may also change the amount of time it takes to fall asleep and total sleep time, keeping you from falling into the deeper stages of sleep, where the body does most of its healing. One glass of wine with dinner will most likely not affect your sleep since it takes about 90 minutes to metabolize 1 ounce of alcohol. However, 1 ounce within 2 hours of bedtime or amounts greater than 1 ounce may disrupt your sleep.
- Avoid smoking or exposure to nicotine. Like caffeine, nicotine can be stimulating and result in increased heart rate, rapid breathing, increased brain activity and higher levels of stress hormones. This stimulation can make it difficult for most smokers to fall asleep and stay asleep. Smoking can also exacerbate snoring because of the irritation on the airway.
- Avoid foods you may be sensitive to. This is particularly true for dairy and wheat products, as they may interrupt sleep and serotonin levels. Food sensitivities may result in sleep apnea, snoring, heartburn, nasal and sinus congestion or gastrointestinal upset.
- To maintain hormonal balance, menopausal women need to eat more food containing estrogen, including soy, flaxseed and fennel.