

An illustration of a woman with brown hair sleeping peacefully in bed. She is wearing a pink top and is holding a blue cylindrical pillow. The bed has a pink blanket with white polka dots and a blue blanket. To her left is a laptop computer. In the background, there is a large orange sun-like lamp and a green wall. The overall style is soft and painterly.

are you *sleeping right?*

NOT GETTING ENOUGH QUALITY SLEEP
COULD SET YOU UP FOR DEPRESSION AND
HEART DISEASE. OUR WRITER GETS HER SLEEP
PATTERNS ANALYSED AND FINDS OUT WHY.

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Do you wake up feeling like you haven't caught a wink in days, even after eight full hours of sleep? Chances are, we all have a gripe about our sleep – it's not as satisfying as we would like, or we're not getting much of it. But whatever the case, most of us put our sleep issues down to our hectic schedules and try to live with them.

I would have done the same too, until I checked in with Dr Lim Li Ling, medical director of the Singapore Neurology & Sleep Centre, as well as director of the Singapore General Hospital's Sleep Disorders Unit. "You'd go to the doctor if you were sick. But many people with sleep problems don't until they get out of hand, like when they fall asleep at the wheel, for example," she says.

According to Dr Lim, who is the only sleep medicine specialist certified by the American Board of Sleep Medicine, a good night's rest is the key to achieving our personal best. It is crucial for peak brain performance. Sleeping, she reveals, is really for your brain. "Many people seem proud of sleeping very little, as if it were a badge of success," says Dr Lim. "The converse is more likely to be true."

"Poor sleep and sleep disorders can lead to a lot of serious illnesses", continues Dr Lim. These include depression, diabetes, obesity, hypertension and heart disease. "People are concerned about these major killers, but they do not realise that they can be attributed to the lack of quality sleep," says Dr Lim. "Sleep is an important part of the healing and prevention

of these diseases in the first place." Indeed, on the mortality-sleep duration chart that sleep experts use, the U-shaped curve shows mortality rising steeply once you defect from the number of hours your body needs to sleep. Simply put: Grab enough sleep and you'll live longer.

How much is too much?

But I had come to see Dr Lim for a recent development in my sleep pattern that was quite the opposite of most people's – I was sleeping too much! Being self-employed, I could sleep the day away after pulling an all-nighter. In fact, it was normal for me to sleep 10 to 12 hours a day; I was literally sleeping my life away!

Dr Lim pointed out a number of flaws in my lifestyle that were turning me into a dream machine. First of all, my biological clock was seriously out of sync, no thanks to an irregular sleep schedule. Going against my body's natural body clock, which is regulated by light and melatonin, has been proven to disrupt sleep patterns and adversely affect health and mortality, says Dr Lim. Generally, your biological clock follows the light-dark cycles of the day; when darkness falls, melatonin level rises and you're ready for bed. But I was forcing my body to stay awake past 3am when it is already in closed-for-the-day mode.

To gauge how much sleep is enough for you, you first need to regulate your body clock by keeping the same sleep-wake timetable each day, says Dr Lim. Then, allow yourself to wake naturally; the number of hours you sleep is an indication of what your body requires. Most people need six to 10 hours of sleep. But there is no hard and fast rule for the number of hours you need, says Dr Lim. Some people are "short sleepers" and require less than five hours

a night. Others are “long sleepers” who can’t stay awake on anything less than 10 hours.

To find out what exactly was causing my excessive snoozing, Dr Lim suggested I take a polysomnogram, a sleep study that analysed body functions during sleep to find out if I was snoozing properly. I could do it during my normal sleeping time and even at home. So the date was set. For \$800 to \$1,500 (depending on what tests are performed), I was going to find out if there was anything wrong with my sleep.

Let the testing begin

The sleep technologist came around to my place with a backpack full of equipment to set up a wireless computer terminal. There was a dizzying array of wires, tapes and belts. Electrodes were stuck on my face and around my body to measure eye and body activity; an oximeter was clipped to my index finger to measure blood oxygen saturation; a belt was wrapped around my chest to check my breathing effort; and a plastic film was inserted into my nostrils to assess how I was breathing through my nose. My bodily functions during each sleep cycle and stage would be measured and recorded. I thought I would never fall asleep. Then again, my problem was having difficulty waking up!



The next day, Dr Lim had my results. “You have mild-to-moderate positional and REM-related sleep apnoea,” she says. It sounds like a complicated prognosis but Dr Lim broke it down for me. Sleep apnoea is a sleep disorder characterised by pauses in breathing during sleep. More specifically, obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) occurs when there is a blockage to your breathing during sleep. It is a common type of sleep disorder that affects 15 per cent of Singaporeans. A sign of sleep apnoea is excessive sleepiness, even though you had sufficient time to sleep. You can spot someone with sleep apnoea from his snoring; that said, not every snorer has the condition, says Dr Lim.

Clinically significant levels of apnoea is linked to cardiovascular diseases such as heart disease and stroke. Experts agree that sleep apnoea can be dangerous because it is not commonly detected until it reaches a severe, even fatal stage, when you are unable to function. Dr Anne Hsu, senior consultant of the Sleep Disorders Unit at Singapore General Hospital, says that obstructive sleep apnoea is a major concern that needs to be diagnosed and treated. If left alone, it can lead to heart disease, hypertension and diabetes.

Next, the “positional” part of my condition. Now, lying on our backs may seem like the most natural position to sleep in, but experts say it can cause the tongue to fall back. This worsens the existing upper airway obstruction that disrupts breathing.

I was also informed that my apnoea index is in the moderate range during Rapid Eye Movement or REM sleep in the back position. This meant that there is significant obstruction in my upper air passage, causing me to breathe shallower. But it was nothing to

“ LYING ON YOUR BACK WHILE YOU SLEEP MAY CAUSE YOUR TONGUE TO FALL BACK AND DISRUPT YOUR BREATHING.”

worry about, I was told, as a lax muscle tone is my body's normal defence mechanism. During REM sleep, our body is partially paralysed, so that we do not act out our dreams. On the flipside, it also worsens sleep apnoea.

Getting to the root

Not everyone needs medical treatment. Take my case, for instance. For my low overall apnoea index of 7.1, Dr Lim says I just need to modify my sleeping style like adopt a side-sleeping position, rather than lie on my back (a tennis ball sewn onto the back of my T-shirt will do the trick), avoid alcohol and regulate my sleeping hours. If my index were above 20, it would be a cause for concern. Health-wise, I would carry a higher risk for heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. My severely impaired sense of judgment would also make me a walking accident when I'm going down the stairs, or crossing the road.

Checking in with an ENT (ear, nose and throat) specialist is a good idea to examine and rule out obstruction or congestion. When it comes to the treatment, doctors zero in on the cause. It could be as simple as tweaking your lifestyle to manage stress or an illness, or in some cases, losing some weight. Other solutions include wearing a respiratory ventilation mask that delivers pressurised air to push open the obstruction in the upper air passage during sleep. In very mild obstructive sleep apnoea, nasal strips can help. Reconstructive surgery may be required in extreme cases. Alternatively, for REM-related sleep apnoea, medication that suppresses REM sleep may be prescribed. Most of these REM-suppressing drugs are anti-depressants and do not have long-term ill effects.

I'm glad I didn't dismiss my sleep excessiveness as plain laziness and left it at that. You shouldn't either. Take control of that constant heavy-lidded feeling as early as you can.



sleep well, live well

These 7 sleep tips can help you get the rest you need.

■ Sleep just enough

Adults normally require six to 10 hours of sleep a night; sleeping over or under your quota can greatly increase your mortality rate.

■ Don't sleep in on weekends too much

Not all sleep experts think that you can catch up fully on your sleep debt over the weekends. Cramming more sleep than you're usually used to can throw your body clock off. But if you can't help it because of your work or lifestyle, Dr Lim says short naps and sleeping in a little on weekends are acceptable.

■ Obeying your body clock

Our body has a natural body clock, which regulates sleep and wake, and functions best when it is in sync with this rhythm.

■ Smoking and drinking coffee

Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants that interfere with your ability to fall asleep.

■ Drinking

Alcohol slows brain activity so it might seem to aid sleep, but it may cause you to end up having fragmented sleep.

■ Exercise

Physical activity enhances the deep, refreshing stage of sleep, although you should not exercise three hours before bedtime.

■ Relaxing before bed

To sleep well, it is important to give your body cues that it is time to slow down and rest, like dimming the lights.

