

By Janet Martin

## Give Yourself the Gift of Sleep

How to do your best by getting more rest this holiday season.

**f**or centuries people all over the world have celebrated the rebirth of the sun. With song, food, festival and prayer, humans have marked the winter solstice—the passing of the shortest day of the year. For this reason many religious holidays that occur in winter, such as Christmas and Hanukkah, incorporate the symbolism of light.

Ironically, during the season when we should be taking time out to observe the seemingly magical turn toward spring, anticipating longer days and lasting light, we tend to fill up our calendars with commitments and indulge to excess. What

too many of us do is relinquish a good night's sleep, which essentially restores our body, mind and soul. This December, during the season of gifts, you might try something new. To get healthily, happily and safely through the holidays, you might consider giving yourself and your loved ones nature's original gift: sleep.

The benefits of sleep are measurable in many ways: physical performance, mental acumen and creative ability. Doctors still don't know why we are programmed to sleep approximately one-third of every 24 hours.

"It's not as if the brain needs to rest; many parts of the brain are active as we sleep," according to Carl E. Hunt, M.D., director of the National

Center on Sleep Disorders Research in Bethesda, Maryland. "But we know it's important for the body to have time for restoration and reorganization—downtime."

What sleep experts do know is what happens in our bodies when we doze: Our immune system is activated to combat diseases, including infections. Natural killer cells, which target tumors, are boosted. Growth hormones are released. Perhaps as a result of these factors, people who sleep between eight and nine hours are more likely to live longer.

"To grasp the fullness of our waking lives, we have to make the most of our sleeping time," says William Dement, Ph.D., founder and director of the Stanford University Sleep Research Center in California. But during the holidays, who has the

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**People who get between eight and nine hours of sleep tend to live longer and be healthier.**





**Health** Continued from page 66  
meetings, or nodding off in church.

Why do we sleep less than we need to? Simply put, because we can. And we choose to, daily. A few decades ago television screens went dark at 11 p.m. Now there are programs on 24 hours.

## Doing More on Less

Americans have a macho attitude about sleep that doesn't serve them well. "When was the last time you heard someone say, 'I get by on nine

hours a night?'" asks Dr. Roth. Instead, what they say is, "I sleep six hours a night." But this actually short-circuits their performance. Norman Ford, M.D., author of *How to*

*Get a Good Night's Sleep* (Barnes & Noble Books), cites a study on men who deliberately shortened their sleep to "save time." It turns out that the time they saved by borrowing from the night, they wasted the next day by making errors and forgetting things. Plus, they were "too tired and irritated to enjoy their day."

Research shows that we do more on adequate—not less—sleep. Our brains like to sleep every day. And six hours is not enough; we need eight. To ignore this is to ignore the brain, and to ignore the brain is folly.


Many of us will miss some sleep during the holidays and other days as well, so what can we do? Nap? New evidence is in that a Western industrialized culture like ours could learn from "siesta cultures" like those in Mexico and South America. Studies conducted by Alan Hobson, M.D., Robert Stickgold, Ph.D., and researchers at Harvard University found that the brain "uses a night's sleep to consolidate the memories of habits, actions and

skills learned during the day."

In the July 2002 edition of *Nature Neuroscience*, Sara Mednick, Ph.D., Dr. Stickgold and colleagues reported that subjects tested for performance and mental ability four times daily experienced "burnout"—irritation, frustration and poorer performance—as the day wore on. When allowed to nap, their performance got better. The conclusion: Sleep—even a nap—enhances information processing and learning.

Rafael Pelayo, M.D., assistant professor at the Stanford Sleep Disorders Clinic, says that from time to time he prescribes a medication such as Ambien that is safe and non-addictive, but only as a temporary measure. In the long run, prescriptions and over-the-counter medications are not the answer. The body will fight those substances, and they are sometimes habit-forming.

In our post 9/11 world, problems abound and anxiety can be a waking presence. To promote a sleep-inducing feeling, experts recommend bedtime

A woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a pink robe, is sitting up in bed reading an open book. A bedside lamp is visible in the background.

**Regular nighttime rituals such as curling up with a relaxing book prepare your mind and body for sleep.**



patterns or rituals. Jerrold S. Maxmen, M.D., author of *A Good Night's Sleep* (W.W. Norton & Company), advises that not only is man a creature of habit, but sleep is also a "creation of habit." Patterns that prepare us pleasantly to sleep can help...a warm bath, favorite music, a restful book.

The holidays themselves provide opportunities for pleasure found in rituals and customs of quiet delight. Some people watch the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Others attend the *Nutcracker Suite* ballet. Some seek out Handel's *Messiah* or read to children Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*. It's as if this time, as the world shifts its nights and days toward spring, is special—set apart for hope, far from daily cares.

This December, as we celebrate the holidays, gather together, honor our faiths and acknowledge earth's dependable journey around the sun, we can align our priorities toward happiness and health. We can give ourselves nature's healing gift. The reward for earthly effort and celestial trust, noted in texts as ancient as the Bible, is the special gift of sleep. **FC**

# The Secret to Sleeping Well

**Those of us caught up in the inevitable whirlwind of holiday activity might try the following steps in order to get a good night's rest.**

**Sunlight sets your biological clock**, synchronizing the sleep/wake cycle. Spend 30 minutes outside each day.

**Log your sleep** for a week with the idea of determining what helps you relax, fall asleep and awake refreshed.

**Enjoy a nibble**—not a banquet—before bedtime. Heavy meals disturb sleep. Try Santa's treat—milk and cookies. Milk, a source of tryptophan, is a sleep aid, and a small cookie includes carbohydrates, which are also sleep enhancing. Bypass the nightcap, however. Alcohol interferes with deep sleep cycles, causing fatigue the next day.

**Eliminate external noise** with a fan, soft music or other lulling sounds. Some people enjoy recordings of a waterfall, the ocean or other tranquil white noise.

**Prepare for bedtime** as a pleasurable event. Take a bath, listen to a soothing

radio program; plump up the bed pillows; snuggle up with a good book.

**Watch out for late-night stress.** Put away the checkbook; turn off the television news; postpone serious discussions; write down troublesome thoughts to be dealt with later.

**Exercise at least 30 minutes a day** in the afternoon or early evening, but not within two hours of bedtime lest the exertion interfere with sleep.

**Let your mind wander in pleasant places**...across a far-flung beach...among blue-shadowed mountains...in a shady, green park. If you lie awake for too long, read something inspirational or soothing to reinforce relaxing thoughts.

**Let sleep sort itself out.** Regularity is the key. Get up at the same time each morning. If the holidays set off a disturbed pattern of sleep for you, you might consider getting it under control with temporary medication recommended by your physician. After all, life is a gift, and one-third of it is spent in sleep. We would do well to enjoy it.