



Can You Catch Up on Lost Sleep?

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Every day, people come to us seeking help for their fatigue, having heard how we have helped many of their friends. One of the first questions I ask is, “Are you getting the recommended 7-8 hours of sleep every night?”

What if the answer is “no”? If you’ve lost your precious hours of sleep, will you ever feel rested again, or are you condemned to feeling tired for the foreseeable future?

To answer this question, let’s do some sleep math. You lost two hours of sleep every night last week because of a big project. On the weekend you were able to get a total of four hours extra sleep. Although you do not feel tired, you’re still carrying around a heavy load of sleepiness, or what experts call “sleep debt” - in this case something like six hours, almost a full night’s sleep. A study in the journal *Sleep* found that the more tired we get, the less tired we feel - so don’t fool yourself. Even if you don’t feel tired after losing sleep, your body is tired.

Most sleep debt is due to burning the candle at both ends - consistently failing to get to bed on time and to stay there until we’ve slept enough. Sleep studies conducted by Stanford University show that in the short term, not getting enough sleep leads to a foggy brain, reduced vision, impaired driving, and memory trouble. Long-term effects include obesity, insulin resistant diabetes, and heart disease.

In a landmark study of human sleep deprivation, University of Chicago researchers followed a group of student volunteers who slept only four hours nightly for six consecutive days. The volunteers developed higher blood pressure and higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and they produced only half the usual number of antibodies to a flu vaccine.

The inescapable conclusion is that sleep is not a luxury; it’s a necessity.

Important Sleep Rules to Live By:

Make up short-term debt – If you missed 10 hours of sleep over the course of a week, add 3-4 extra sleep hours on the weekend and an extra hour or two per night the following week until you have repaid the debt fully.

Avoid backsliding into a new debt cycle – Plan a vacation with a light schedule and few obligations. Try to get to bed early each night, and turn off the alarm clock so you get up naturally.

Address a long-term debt – it won’t happen in one weekend. Tacking on an extra hour or two of sleep a night is the way to catch up. You may find yourself needing up to 10 hours of shut-eye per night, but as the days pass, the amount of time will gradually decrease. For the chronically sleep deprived, it can take a few months to get back into a natural sleep pattern and repay the sleep debt.

Rule out Sleep Apnea – Make sure to take a simple Home Sleep Test – in the convenience and comfort of your own home – to determine if you have sleep apnea, and if you do, treat it with a simple dental device. (If you snore, there is an added bonus – you will stop snoring and feel refreshed all day.)

If you are always feeling tired, your body is telling you something. Research has shown that what it’s telling you is important, and so you should pay attention. You will not only feel refreshed and alert, but also keep your body strong, healthy and functioning as it should.