



Sleep: the other nutrient

Welcome to PhysioBiz, with healthcare advice and information you can trust and rely on, brought to you by the South African Society of Physiotherapy!

It's that time of year – you feel stretched thin, like a balloon about to pop, as you race towards the end of the year, meeting work commitments, preparing for the holidays ahead, thinking of the mass of family events coming up. You're popping vitamins, eating healthy foods and trying to include gym in your schedule because you know this will help you cope.

But what about the 'nutrient' we all forget? As vital as water and protein and exercise and clean air, *sleep is one area where many of us fall down.* We bring work home, get up early to swim or gym or do chores like laundry before work, take sleeping pills to simulate sleep and do without sleep if need be.

Around one to three in ten adults experience sleep disorders, a number which is rising, and that's alarming, say scientists. The authors of a recently published paper state, "given that they have been linked to a range of detrimental outcomes. Specifically, sleep problems have been associated with major medical conditions such as heart and lung disease, osteoporosis and bodily pain, disability, low quality of life, while there is also evidence that insomnia may result in an increased mortality risk."

What to do

- Discuss your sleep patterns with your physiotherapist. Sometimes poor sleep may be caused by existing pain conditions; or sleep positions, such as sleeping on your stomach, might be causing you to arch your lower back or turn your head in ways that increase

discomfort and lead to shallow sleep. Your physiotherapist can help you avoid such problems.

- Review your habits. Are you drinking caffeine-loaded drinks within a few hours of sleep-time? Coffee, tea and fizzy drinks often contain caffeine, which is a stimulant. Drink water or herbal teas before bed.
- Are you drinking at night? A glass or two of wine feels harmless, but it could be contributing to poor sleep. It does make you feel sleepy at first, but then it leads to wakefulness and reduces the depth and amount of REM sleep.
- Do you watch TV in the bedroom, or spend the last few hours catching up on screen time on your smartphone? Try to avoid exposure to blue light in the hours before sleep. “Even dim light can interfere with a person's circadian rhythm and melatonin secretion. A mere eight lux—a level of brightness exceeded by most table lamps and about twice that of a night light—has an effect”, notes Stephen Lockley, a Harvard sleep researcher. Blue light, the Harvard scientists add, has a much more powerful effect. (It is possible to get special ‘sunglasses’ or reading glasses which cut out blue light.)
- Are you getting enough moderate-intensity exercise? After about four weeks, studies have found, regular exercise improves quality and quantity of sleep. Speak to your physiotherapist about the right kind of exercise, and appropriate timing of exercise to help you sleep better.
- Do you have symptoms of a sleep disorder, such as restless leg syndrome or sleep apnoea? Discuss the possibilities with your physiotherapist – she or he will know who to refer you to if it seems you have a problem like this.

Find a physiotherapist near you at www.saphysio.co.za.