Why your sleep really matters

Sleep is not just 'down time', when our brains shut off and bodies rest. Vital tasks carried out during sleep help us stay functional and healthy, enhancing our longevity and quality of life.

Without enough sleep, it's more difficult to focus and pay attention or respond quickly. Lack of sleep can cause mood problems and increase our risk of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and infections. Good sleep enables us to take up the opportunities of our longevity.

What's going on?

Put simply, there are two stages of sleep which replay in cycles of about 90 minutes while we sleep. Sometimes we wake between cycles.

The two stages are defined by whether rapid eye movement (REM) or non-rapid eye movement (NREM) is occurring. In early sleep, NREM sleep dominates in each cycle, removing unnecessary neural connections. In later cycles, REM sleep prevails, strengthening remaining connections. We dream during the REM sleep cycle: this influences our emotional and mental health and can support problem solving and creativity.

How are we doing?

Like adequate nutrition, physical activity and social interaction, sleep is vital to our well-being. However, in our industrial society people are sleeping less. The opportunity is there for us to take more control over our sleep and benefit.

Want to know more?

We should talk to our doctor if concerned by sleep problems. Getting the best out of our sleep has wide ramifications for our overall wellness and longevity.

For a compelling insight into the history and findings of sleep research, 'Why We Sleep' by neuroscientist Matthew Walker is well worth reading.

The **American Sleep Association** has a very readable and informative discussion of sleep and how to manage it [here](#).

In Australia, the **Sleep Health Foundation** is dedicated to raising public awareness of sleep health issues and improve public health and safety. It has an excellent series of Fact Sheets for a wide range of ages and conditions [here](#).

Twelve pointers to better sleep

1. Stick to a regular sleep schedule
2. Don't exercise close to bedtime
3. No caffeine and nicotine after lunch
4. Low alcohol consumption before bed
5. Low food and drink intake before bed
6. Avoid medicines that delay or disrupt sleep
7. No naps after 3pm
8. Relax before bed
9. Warm up before bed, then cool down (bath or shower)
10. Dark, cool bedroom and no gadgets (phone, TV etc)
11. Get some morning sunlight, turn lights down before bed
12. Don't lie awake – get up and relax until you are sleepy

By managing our sleep more effectively, we are better placed to reap the benefits of our longevity.