

## **Sleep: The Pivotal Pillar**

In his book entitled "the Promise of Sleep," Dr. William C. Dement, pioneer of the scientific study of sleep and founder of the National Sleep Foundation at Stanford University makes the case that sleep is a pivotal pillar of wellness.

The wellness pillars are the most basic building blocks of a healthy lifestyle, effecting every aspect of human physiology. Obviously nutrition, the raw input materials for all of our body's chemical processes, determines how well our body functions. Studying how our bodies move and how that movement affects the chemical processes in our bodies we realize that exercise is a wellness pillar. Although stress management is usually regarded as fundamental to wellness, stress is more a symptom of an out of balance life than a cause. Sleep fundamentally affects our wellbeing and our ability to manage stress. Healthy sleep prepares the brain for the next day and renews our mental balance. In contrast, people who are sleep deprived tend to be more violent, aggressive, and less able to deal with the stresses of ordinary life.

In the 1950s the American Cancer Society surveyed over one million Americans representing every county and parish in the U.S. about their exercise, nutrition, smoking, sleep, and other health related habits. Six years later, they repeated the survey. The lowest mortality rates were seen for those who slept around eight hours each night. It appears that we were designed to spend one third of each day sleeping.

Also, sleep is one of many minor, but statistically significant, factors affecting someone's susceptibility to cold virus, even when factors such as stress are taken into account. Sleep directly affects our immune system.

Most importantly, cells in the body are constantly replenishing themselves, repairing not only cuts and bruises, but also the wear and tear of daily living. Much of this repair is the job of growth hormone, which stimulates protein synthesis, helps break down the fats that supply energy for tissue repair, and stimulates cell division to replace old or malfunctioning cells. The concentration of growth hormone released during deep sleep is important for this repair process. The disappearance of sufficient deep sleep in our fast-paced modern society may contribute to the physical decline we experience in old age and our growing epidemic of obesity as less fat is being broken down each night. I'll even go out on limb and suggest that lack of deep sleep may also contribute to malfunctioning cells turning cancerous instead of being repaired.

For those who say, "I don't have time to sleep; I'll sleep when I'm dead," that may be sooner than you think if you ignore the wellness pillars, including sleep.

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