Are there health benefits to taking a nap?

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Most people consider taking naps to be a much needed treat, but could there be real health benefits to catching up on some sleep? Baylor College of Medicine's Dr. Philip Alapat discusses whether there are health benefits to taking a nap.

"When you take a nap, you are trying to make up for some lack of sleep that is biologically perceived by your body, and you sleep when you normally wouldn't," said Alapat, assistant professor of medicine in the section of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine.

Alapat explained that as human beings we use our circadian rhythms to generate a sleep and wake cycle. If everything is perfect and we get the right amount of sleep, then everything runs smoothly, but this does not often happen.

"Most people are perpetually sleep deprived and to make up for this sleep deprivation they try to catch up by taking a nap," he said. "If you are able to take a nap in a safe and supportive environment then you can theoretically rejuvenate yourself."

If you are sleep deprived, it is possible that instead of fighting through your sleepiness, you might actually do better for the rest of the day if you take a nap because this can help your brain catch up with that little bit of sleep that it feels it needs, Alapat said.

Naps should ideally be taken when you actually feel tired and when you feel like it would be beneficial, he cautioned.

In general, Alapat recommends that naps last no longer than 30 minutes. When you are falling asleep, the brain goes through certain stages of sleep and if you allow your body to reach a deeper stage of sleep, which usually occurs after about 30 minutes, then it can become difficult to wake up. By restricting your naps to less than a half-hour, usually it is easier to get up and resume your daytime function.

"If you recognize that you need to take a nap in the afternoon to have reasonable functioning, like to avoid falling asleep on the road when you are driving or doing other tasks that require attention, then you are

probably sleep deprived and you need to look at trying to improve your sleep quality and/or sleep quantity on a regular basis," Alapat said. "If you are able to get into a nightly routine of better sleep quality then you may find that the naps in the afternoon are no longer necessary and you'll have reasonable function throughout the day."

To help improve sleep quality, Alapat offered the following tips:

- Have a regular bedtime and wake-up time.
- Make sure you are getting between seven and eight hours of sleep.
- Make sure your bed and your bed environment are cool, dark and quiet.
- Try to minimize distractions before bedtime and restrict your bed environment to sleep and avoid watching television, reading books and looking at your phone while in bed.
- Allow for a wind down period prior to bedtime.
- Shut off significant alerting influences an hour before your expected bedtime. This means you shouldn't watch an intense action movie and then immediately expect to fall asleep. Your brain needs some time to wind down from those kinds of activities. Excessive light exposure, like that from a television, also tends to interfere with your body's intrinsic circadian rhythm.

"It is important to recognize that your body's need for sleep is non-negotiable and anything less than what your body needs is going to be less than adequate for your body to function optimally," Alapat said.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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