

Sleep Awareness Month

How much sleep do we really need?

You hear the advice that people need eight hours of sleep, but does that apply to every person? Many people seem to get by on less than eight so how much sleep do we really need?

The first thing experts will tell you about sleep is that there is no “magic number.” Not only do different age groups need different amounts of sleep but sleep needs are also individual. Just like any characteristics you are born with, the amount of sleep you need to function best may be different for you than for someone who is the same age and gender.

Another reason there is no “magic number” for your sleep results from two different factors that researchers are learning

about: a person’s basal sleep need—the amount of sleep our bodies need on a regular basis for optimal performance—and sleep debt, the accumulated sleep that is lost to poor sleep habits, sickness, awakenings due to environmental factors or other causes. Two studies suggest that healthy adults have a basal sleep need of seven to eight hours every night, but where things get complicated is the interaction between the basal need and the sleep debt. For instance, you might meet your basal sleep need on a single night or a few nights in a row,



but still have an unresolved sleep debt that may make you feel more sleepy and less alert at times.

Though scientists are still learning about the concept of basal sleep need, one thing sleep research certainly has shown is that sleeping too little can not only inhibit your productivity and ability to remember and consolidate information, but lack of sleep can also lead to serious health consequences and jeopardize your safety and the safety of individuals around you.

For example, short sleep duration is linked with:

- Increased risk of motor vehicle accidents
- Increase in body mass index— a greater likelihood of obesity due to an increase appetite caused by sleep deprivation
- Increased risk of diabetes and heart problems
- Increased risk for psychiatric conditions
- Decreased ability to pay attention, react to signals, or remember new information

One of the linked factors with short sleep duration is obesity and increased appetite. Research has found links between appetite increase and sleep deprivation due to hormones that are produced when you’re short on sleep. This can not only lead to gaining weight, but sleep deprivation and weight gain can lead to serious health problems like the onset of sleep apnea, hypertension, heart attack, diabetes and stroke.