

Heart TALK

Heart-healthy and Stroke-free Living with Dr. Amy L. Doneen, DNP, ARNP

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Thoughts from Dr. Amy

5 Natural Ways to Sleep Better



This article will put to you to sleep — if you follow our expert tips. And here's why you need these shut-eye strategies now. Americans have never been more fatigued. More than one-third of US adults routinely sleep fewer than seven hours a night, according to the CDC. That's alarming since skimping on slumber raises risk for cardiovascular disease (CVD), the leading killer of Americans, and also elevates risk for diabetes, obesity and depression.

What's the solution? Simple strategies can powerfully improve your sleep — without pills. Here are five natural, science-backed ways to get the healthy rest you need for optimal heart health.



FOLLOW A CONSISTENT SLEEP SCHEDULE — EVEN ON WEEKENDS. A [new study](#) links “social jet lag” — going to bed and waking up later on weekends than you do during the week—to poorer health, compared to having a consistent bedtime and wake-up time. The researchers reported that for each hour of social jet lag, risk for CVD rises by 11%. “The results show that sleep regularity, beyond sleep duration alone, plays a significant role in our health,” says lead study author Sierra B. Forbush. The findings suggest that a regular sleep schedule can be an easy, effective and natural way to avoid heart attacks and stroke. The BaleDoneen Method recommends 7 to 8 hours of sleep a night.



EXERCISE REGULARLY. Studies show that working out several times a week not only helps ward off insomnia, but can also improve sleep quality, while greatly reducing your risk for CVD, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity. A [recent analysis of studies](#) found that exercise reduced sleep apnea symptoms by 20%. The BaleDoneen Method recommends at least 22 minutes of aerobic exercise daily, such as brisk walking, biking, or jogging. Before starting a new exercise regimen, check with your medical provider to make sure it's right for you.



LIMIT CAFFEINE, ESPECIALLY IN THE EVENING. The average American drinks at least three caffeinated beverages a day, a habit that contributes to sleepless nights. And while you may feel that a glass or two of wine will help you nod off, alcohol actually

impairs rest in a variety of ways, including adversely affecting REM sleep, making slumber less refreshing. Instead, sip chamomile tea — research shows that the fragrant herbal brew can help you settle down for slumber by soothing the nerves and easing anxiety.



MAKE YOUR BEDROOM A SANCTUARY FOR SLEEP. Your bed should only be used for two things: slumber and sex. Keep your bedroom comfortably cool, which promotes better shuteye than a warm or hot room, and free of any reminders of work, which can make you feel too stressed to relax. Also cover your clock: Sleep researchers report that clock-watching creates anxiety and can worsen insomnia. Turn your alarm clock's face to the wall or hide it under the bed.



GO OFF THE GRID. One hour before bedtime, dim the lights and sign off from technology use. The bright light from small and big screens as you surf the Web, watch TV, or check emails on your mobile device stimulates the brain, instead of allowing it to slow down for shuteye. To help you relax, try taking a warm bath before bed. Some studies show that the slight change in body temperature after a bath serves as a natural cue that it's time to sleep.



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Carrie Fisher's Death: How Dangerous is Sleep Apnea?

Many people were shocked when an autopsy report attributed "Star Wars" actress Carrie Fisher's death, in part, to sleep apnea, along with other factors. Affecting more than 18 million Americans — who reportedly include such celebrities as Shaquille O'Neal, Rosie O'Donnell, Regis Philbin, Roseanne Barr and Rick Perry — this common sleep disorder often goes undiagnosed and untreated, despite its potentially serious or even fatal complications.

If untreated, obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), which causes people to stop breathing repeatedly during sleep, sometimes dozens of times a night, can raise risk for high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, type 2 diabetes and heart failure. A 2013 study by the Mayo Clinic also linked sleep apnea to significantly higher risk for sudden cardiac death. Why is OSA so dangerous and how can you safeguard your heart health if you have it? Here is a closer look at OSA, which is on the rise in both men and women.

What are the symptoms of OSA?

OSA symptoms include loud snoring, choking or gasping during sleep, restless sleep, waking up with a very dry or sore throat, daytime drowsiness or lack of energy, morning headaches and trouble concentrating. High blood pressure that doesn't respond to medications can also be a warning sign of undiagnosed sleep apnea. If you fit this scenario, talk to your medical provider about being checked for sleep apnea, even if you don't think you snore, since many people with OSA are unaware of their symptoms.

Who is at risk for sleep apnea?

Sleep apnea is twice as common in men as women, but rates in women are rising, mainly due to the obesity epidemic. About 50% of people diagnosed with sleep apnea are overweight or obese. Other risk factors include smoking, a family history of OSA, having high blood pressure or diabetes, chronic nasal congestion, and asthma. However, anyone can develop OSA, even children.

What's the link between OSA and cardiovascular problems?

Sleep apnea harms cardiovascular health

in several ways. Recent studies suggest that OSA — rather than obesity—is a major cause of adverse changes to the blood vessel lining (endothelium) that makes it easier for plaque build-up to occur. OSA also contributes to endothelial inflammation, one of the root causes of CVD. Sudden drops in blood oxygen levels during apnea episodes raise blood pressure, which in turn increases risk for heart attacks and strokes. OSA also increases risk for atrial fibrillation, a heart rhythm disorder that puts people at increased risk for stroke. The more severe OSA is, the higher the risk for CVD, the leading killer of Americans.

What's the best way to find out if I have OSA?

Ask your medical provider if you need a sleep study. This test involves being hooked up to equipment that monitors heart, lung and brain activity, and your breathing patterns, when you're sleeping. To help your provider evaluate your symptoms and the need for testing, bring a diary of your sleep patterns, level of drowsiness during the day, and any symptoms you or your bed partner notice during the night.

How is sleep apnea treated?

OSA is often treated with a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine. This involves wearing a mask over your nose and/or mouth that gently blows air to keep your airways open during sleep. In studies, use of these devices has been shown to dramatically reduce or even eliminate CV risks. Lifestyle changes, such as weight loss, quitting smoking, and exercising more, are usually advised as well.

July Recipe

Avocado-Cucumber Tuna Salad



Quick and easy to make, this zesty salad is perfect for a light summer lunch or dinner that will make your heart — and taste buds — rejoice. Tuna and avocado are ranked among the world's healthiest foods, with several studies suggesting that eating them regularly can help lower cholesterol, reduce inflammation, aid weight loss, and help protect against heart attacks. This recipe is also a delicious sandwich spread, or can be served with crackers at a party.

INGREDIENTS

- 3 five-ounce cans of white albacore tuna in water, drained
- 2 ripe avocados
- 2 cups diced cucumber
- 4 tablespoons finely diced red onion
- 2 green onions, sliced horizontally
- 1 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 limes, juiced
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Romaine lettuce leaves, whole

Mash drained tuna and avocados with a fork in a mixing bowl. Add cucumber, red and green onion, cilantro and garlic powder and mix well. Season to taste with black pepper. Chill 30 minutes, then spoon on to lettuce leaves and enjoy! Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from Littlebroken.com

