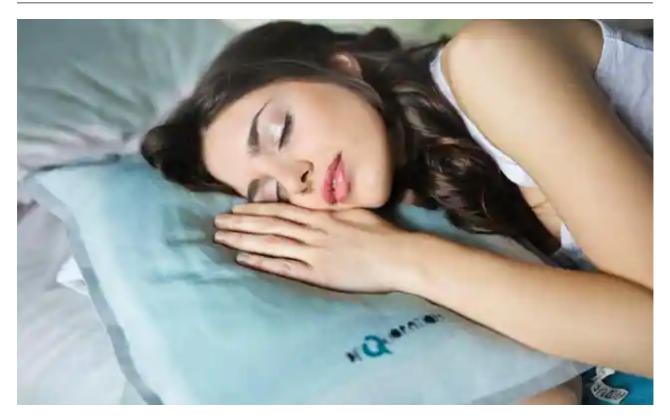# Why skimping on your sleep is a bad idea

A recent study explains why sleeping less than six hours a night is terrible for your mental and physical well-being

Deep sleep is essential for good health (Bruce Mars (Unsplash))

There was a time when Delhi-based Mayank Shreshtha, an IT executive working Gurugram, did not have trouble falling asleep. His wife, Vanita, attests as much. "He just needed to hit the pillow, and off he would journey into dreamland," she says, rolling her eyes. In July, however, all this changed; he started experiencing trouble sleeping. "Suddenly, I started lying awake in bed looking at the ceiling for hours," says Shreshtha. He put it down to his new work-from-home routine. "With WFH, the line between work and home has blurred. I'm constantly on the laptop or phone attending to office work," he says.

As many of us juggle work and home, leading hectic lifestyles, sleep becomes the most common casualty. In a recent study published in the Annals of Behavioral Medicine that examined how sleeping fewer than six hours for eight consecutive nights can impact your overall well-being, researchers note that lack of sleep had several physical and mental repercussions. "Participants reported a pile-up of angry, nervous, lonely, irritable and frustrated feelings as a result of sleep loss," said the study. It also added that participants also experienced more physical symptoms, such as upper respiratory issues, aches,

gastrointestinal problems and other health concerns. "These negative feelings and symptoms were continuously elevated throughout consecutive sleep loss days and didn't return to baseline levels unless they had a night sleep of more than six hours," it said.

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But, how much sleep do we need actually? After all, haven't we all seen some people manage their life with a four-hour sleep cycle while there are others for whom 10 hours seems less. Which is the right number then? Experts say that the amount of sleep we need each day varies throughout our lives. According to the National Sleep Foundation guidelines, the number of hours one needs to sleep depends on nine different stages of a person's life. So, while newborns need as much as 17 hours sleep a day, infants need up to a maximum of 15 hours, which goes on dwindling till it reaches a level when older adults can make do with seven hours of sleep.

One of the biggest disruptors of sleep in recent years has been technology. Research conducted by the University of Southern Denmark that reviewed 49 studies published between 2009 and 2019 stated that electronic media deeply affects sleep patterns. The study revealed that the use of electronic media and devices delayed bedtime and resulted in poor sleep quality. This is because time spent on screen replaces time spent sleeping, and this 'lost sleep' is never fully compensated. Additionally, the ongoing covid-19 pandemic seems to have made things worse. NHS Digital—the trading name of the Health and Social Care Information Centre in the UK—confirmed that in 2021, problems getting to sleep, waking in the night, waking early, and other sleep-related issues were higher compared to the previous years.

Technology overuse can impact sleep quality (Victoria Heath (Unsplash))

Dr MS Kanwar, Lead-Lung Transplant and Covid Team, Senior Consultant, Department of Pulmonology, Critical Care and Sleep Medicine, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, Delhi, says sleep is a significant part of human life. "It helps the body rejuvenate and also prevent various diseases," he says. And yet, we are not sleeping enough. Bengaluru-based sleep solutions provider Wakefit, which aims to make sleep and home solutions affordable and comfortable through transparent transactions, in its annual Great Indian Sleep Scorecard 2020 report, said that one in five Indians suffered from insomnia. Similarly, Royal Philips, a global leader in health technology, released a worldwide sleep survey report the same year that pointed out that sleep health' is an ever-rising issue among Indian adults. It says that 44 per cent of adults surveyed globally admit their sleep has worsened in the last five years.

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Pune-based septuagenarian Chandana Mukherjee is one of them. She had always been a sound sleeper, she said. But over the last few years, sleep had begun eluding her. "I don't sleep very well nowadays. Earlier I put it to the passing of my husband. But even after a couple of years had passed, I still struggled to get sleep," she says. Finally, her daughter-in-law Arati suggested that she visit a sleep specialist. She recalls that the

doctor told her that it was common at her age to lose sleep, especially since she was a hypertension patient and needed to be on medication to manage it. "The doctor suggested that I follow some important sleep hygiene tips, including removing screen time one hour before sleeping, exercising regularly during the day, and having a consistent and relaxing bedtime routine," says Mukherjee. She adds that the small changes in her lifestyle are finally helping her relax and sleep better.

Sleep is the diet of our mind. Good sleep is crucial for our body to work well as it affects the functioning of our body—from the mind, cardiovascular activities, immunity to metabolism and more. Dr Partap Chauhan, Director, Jiva Ayurveda, says, "People with an unhealthy lifestyle and excessive stress and anxiety find it difficult to sleep naturally. There has also been an increase in insomnia cases after the pandemic." According to him, apart from the respiratory system, coronavirus also impacts the nervous system. "In Ayurveda, this is known as 'Vata Aggravation'. When Vata increases in the body, it reaches our brain triggering some emotion that eventually affects our sleep," he says.

On average, adults need roughly nine hours of sleep per night, say experts. Rest is one of the three sub-pillars that support life along with food and a wholesome lifestyle. Contrary to what many may believe, most doctors stress that day sleep cannot compensate for sleep deprivation during the night. Deep sleep is essential for the repair and restoration of the body. Shreshtha would do well to take a leaf or two out of Mukherjee's newly-adopted sleep hygiene practices.