

Ayurveda: Yoga's Sister Science

# Get your beauty sleep

A good night's sleep can be your best health insurance, writes Thomas Mueller

Good quality sleep can be your best health insurance. And yet there are still times in my life when I wake up sighing before the alarm goes off, only to realise I have not yet fallen asleep.

Sometimes, a healthy, restful sleep can almost seem a luxury, especially when traveling or in emotionally stressful situations where deadlines need to be met or being confronted with the terminal illness of a loved one. In today's fast paced world, just the thought of uncompleted projects could become the very cause of insomnia. But lack of sleep does not only deprive us of quality of life, it can also be the start of many serious diseases. In ayurveda, sleep is known as one of the three pillars of good health, which provides the foundation for physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

**How do we define sleep?**

A healthy, restful sleep means you fall asleep easily when you switch off the light and sleep peacefully. The goal is to deep slumber 6-8 hours without the help of medication. You should wake up rested and refreshed.

A good night's sleep is crucial for your health, because this is the time where important hormones are being produced, such as the human growth hormone (HGH). HGH is responsible for the immune system, it regulates fat metabolism, supports muscle growth and generally acts against ageing. This hormone is produced mostly during the deep sleep phase.

**Sleep types**

Sleep has its own rhythm, which repeats itself about every 90 minutes. Immediately after you fall asleep, a new phase begins where your sleep is light, which then slowly turns into the deep sleep phase. Then a REM phase occurs (rapid eye movement), the time of the night where you start dreaming. This REM phase is initially short but then extends through the night, which means as the REM phase extends, your time of deep sleep reduces. During a six-hour night sleep, the average time of deep sleep is only two hours.

We usually have three to five periods of REM phase during a nights sleep. These phases occur at intervals of 1-2 hours and are highly variable in length. An episode of REM sleep may take five minutes or an hour. Most people spend 25% of their sleep with dreams and the rest in a state of non-dreaming.

Irrespective of which of the three categories of sleeping disturbance you may fall under (see below), the best quality sleep you can get is that which you get before midnight. So make sure you get your beauty sleep early on.

**Sleep disturbances according to Ayurveda:**

Difficulty falling asleep is caused by a *vata* imbalance, an excess of the element of air. This could be due to irregular lifestyle, night shift, excess worry or thinking.

Intermittent awakening is caused by *pitta* imbalance, linked to the element of fire, perhaps due to frustration, anger, excess heat or an over acidic body.

Excessive sleeping, but still waking up in the morning feeling unrefreshed is caused by an imbalance of *kapha*, related to the element of earth. This could be caused through over eating, lack of exercise, depression or toxicity.

**What happens if we do not get enough sleep?**

Studies have shown that if you wake up around 3 o'clock in the morning, during the following 24 hours your immune system is weakened and you are more susceptible to viruses and other pathogens.

Research has also shown that lack of sleep increases the production of inflammatory chemicals (cytokines). It can also lead to the production of chemicals, which can be causative factors for the development of obesity and diabetes. Diseases such as high blood pressure, premature ageing, depression, anxiety and other

psychological disorders may be the result of sleep deprivation. When considering sleep from an ayurvedic perspective, unhealthy sleep leads to the reduction of *ojas* or (immunity), the vital nectar of life which is extracted from food.

*Ojas* as the end product of all digestive processes is responsible for enhanced energy, enthusiasm, joy, clear thinking, and balanced communication between mind and heart.

**What can help?**

In ayurveda, this depends on which of the three bio-energies of *vata*, *pitta* or *kapha* are out of balance. *Vata* is the energy that regulates all neurological processes such as your thinking, cellular communication, and nutrient transportation. *Pitta* is responsible for metabolic functions, the transformation of the food you eat in healthy bodily tissues and *Kapha*, which very much reflects your immunity.

**Vata: difficulties falling asleep**

The problem is insomnia itself increases *Vata*, the bio-energy which is responsible for proper circulation and movement. Any irregularity increases *Vata* and this creates a vicious circle, where *Vata* prevents you from falling asleep, whilst not being able to get a good quality sleep increases *Vata* itself. So, the cause and the effect is the same and often leads to neurological stress.

In this case, a regular daily routine is important: going to bed at the same time, waking up at the same time, regular meal times. All this is essential to balance *Vata*. Also, food should be mainly hot, well cooked and plentiful.

Meditation calms a restless mind, which leads to relaxation and mental tranquility. Massaging the feet and the head with warm sesame oil will help to overcome anxiety and stress.

Drinking warm milk with freshly grated nutmeg, or adding a teaspoon of poppy seeds, also has a calming and relaxing effect. Even a hot water bottle on your stomach can be relaxing.

**Pitta: intermitted awakening**

An overactive *pitta* needs cooling, so make sure that the bedroom is cool and not too hot. Use cotton sheets; keep the bedroom dark, and read inspirational literature for a few minutes before bedtime. Write down your thoughts and concerns before falling asleep; this 'downloading' soothes a raging spirit.

**Kapha: excessive sleep**

A *kapha* constitution may have the problem of sleeping too much. Some people believe they need nine, 10 or more hours of sleep. In the morning, these people often wake up still feeling heavy and tired and show symptoms of sleep deprivation. They may yawn all day and still have the need for an afternoon nap.

In this case, the solution would be to look at your diet. Make sure you only have a light meal such as soup at nighttime. Best is to eat around 6pm. Avoid sweets, dairy, pasta and other grains. Drink hot ginger tea throughout the day. This helps to reduce food cravings and increases your digestion. Avoid napping during the day and get up in the morning before sunrise. ☸



#### Holistic therapy

At his holistic medical centre, Mueller offers a number of key treatments to peel away stress, and by definition, slow the pace of ageing. These include a yoga therapy and pranayama course, two key aspects of stress management and general wellbeing. In this course, specific body postures are used to support physical, mental and emotional health alongside breathing techniques, which help to increase the flow of 'prana' or life force to the mind and the uptake of oxygen to the vital organs. "These practices enhance the effect of other treatments and are essential for self-maintenance," he adds.

There is also a Vedic meditation course, which is a natural, simple and easy to learn technique with immediate benefits that has been demonstrated to significantly reduce stress. "The deep rest gained from Vedic meditation balances the right and left hemisphere of the brain, which in turn harmonises the nervous system," says Mueller. "This leads to improved health on both physical and mental levels. People who meditate on a regular basis feel more relaxed, happier, fulfilled and are more productive."

**"Stress is a known major contributory factor in many disease processes affecting us, from heart disease and cancer to anxiety, depression, addictions, sleep and relationship problems, degeneration and cellular ageing."**

#### Individual approach

Precise measures for stress management vary according to each individual, however. "The ayurvedic approach to stress management has three components to it," says Mueller. "The first one is to identify what the stressors are or where the stress is coming from". The second aspect is "to find out how the stress has negatively impacted on the normal functions of the body and the mind". So, for example, he says, if you work on a computer for long hours every day, this may well take its toll on the hormones besides affecting the mind. But this is a very different situation, for instance, from a person who suffers stress through a situation where a close family member is diagnosed with a serious illness. "The third is to plan a strategy for stress management that is specific to the person's ayurvedic body type".

"In my initial consultation, I will work out what are the stressors and how it has affected the individual and based on that I then decide a plan of what suits that particular patient the best. The solutions and remedies may vary greatly not only according to the type of stressor, but also by the individual too. "My aim is to always try and encourage and empower my patients, which means finding ways that they can deal with the stress themselves over time rather than depending entirely on me as a practitioner."

For example, in the case of a person suffering from stress through excess computer work, "simply by applying sesame oil to the soles of the feet can really take away the heat and tension from the mind, soothing the nerve endings in the skin and causing a deep sense of relaxation." He adds: "Or if there is emotional stress there could be a recommendation of essential oils, such as sandalwood, which has a very cooling effect."

#### Sun room

Inside his London clinic, Mueller also offers clients access to a sun room, where they get to experience not only the warmth and light of a tropical island such as Bali, but the benefits of natural sunlight right in the middle of the capital. It's an additional health boost combined with all of the authentic ayurvedic treatments. Mueller emphasises: "This calming and relaxing environment is a perfect combination of therapeutic effects of full spectrum sunlight and ayurvedic therapies." Inside, it's an incredibly calming and deeply relaxing atmosphere that is very much transforming physically, mentally and emotionally.

The huge scope of Ayurveda, India's ancient healthcare system, mean there are many other treatments and therapies available. Mueller himself undertakes a lot of awareness promotion, flagging the benefits of ayurveda, through regular seminars, training and retreats.



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*"Having studied, practiced and taught Ayurveda worldwide for more than 20 years, I derive immense joy and fulfillment when I am able to share my experience and passion for Ayurveda with my students and clients to empower them on their personal journey to health and wellbeing."*

