

Q.: I'd like to get a good night's sleep, and am considering buying a new bed. Do you have any advice?

A.: Quality sleep affects our waking hours, so your question applies to all of us. Physical and mental stress assails us every day; how we adapt to those stresses is directly affected by the quantity and quality of the past night's sleep. The College of William & Mary's national-class cross-country squad stresses the value of sleep. Most of their athletes get 8-9 hours of sleep per 24 hours; some get 10. For athletes who run 70-115 miles per week, that recovery time is critical healing time; or, to quote the fictional Jason Bourne, "Sleep is a weapon." Let's talk about using sleep time to optimal effect.

First, you'll notice I referred to quality sleep, not just sleep. There are a few B&B's and fold-out beds in the area that turn tourists into my patients. For the rest of us, I'd suggest you not skimp on your bed purchase. Even if you're skating by on just 6 hours of sleep a night, that's still 1/4 of your life! You have a choice of spring-based mattresses, memory foam, waterbeds, futons, and more. The bottom line is that the bed should be comfortable to you. Try it out in the store, lie on it. Try different beds to determine if you prefer softer or more firm. Remember the three bears: A bed that's too soft or too hard just won't do. My advice (with apologies to the local salespeople): Find the bed you like, then GO HOME and try it another day to see if it feels just as wonderful. Since you can't take it home to test drive it, make a good, unhurried decision on this major purchase.

If you're married, you've got yourself a new issue: How do I match my partner's mattress preferences? Hopefully you married someone who likes the house at 68 degrees just like you do, who's neat like you are, etc; but if she likes sleeping on a marshmallow and you prefer something akin to a granite slab, you've got a problem. Consider a bed that has two halves that adjust independently, or have different intrinsic firmness. Ideally, you two will find a happy medium; but don't settle for having each of you be mildly miserable. Find the win-win outcome.

What about pillows? People will pay \$100 for a high-tech pillow for their head, and also sleep with pillows between or behind the knees. If you feel your significant other is trading your affection for the reliable embrace of the body pillow, you two need to talk; but pillows can be used to properly align the neck and back while you sleep. A cervical (neck) pillow should support the natural curve of your neck when you're on your back, neither tipping the head too far forward or allowing it to tip back too far. Another bonus I've heard from my patients: an orthopedic cervical support pillow can also maintain the airway, thus decreasing snoring problems. If you prefer to sleep on your side, an orthopedic pillow that's properly sized to you will support the neck in-line with the body, leaving a proper space for the shoulder. This can decrease neck pain, shoulder pain, even headache pain. Pillows between or behind the knees can relieve stress on the spine, especially in those with back pain or pregnancy (or both). Go for what's comfortable; what works for one person might or might not work for you.

I'd also consider your pre-bedtime rituals when planning for a good night's sleep. If you're not getting to bed early enough, you're starting with a handicap. Avoid caffeine too close to bedtime. Be aware that sleeping pills and some anti-inflammatory medications may interfere with the quality of your sleep, leaving you under-refreshed despite plenty of time between the sheets. There are some herbal teas that may assist with sleep, and most of us are familiar with the effects of certain foods on sleep-- remember how sleepy you got after last Thanksgiving's turkey (for you vegetarians, stick with me-- the Tofurkey doesn't have the same effect)?

Calm your mind before bedtime. Lay the day to rest if you can, so your mind can drift off. If you read before bedtime, reconsider that Stephen King book. Avoid reading postures that stress your neck or back. Considering the modern day we live in, I should mention to do the same if you're reading or otherwise working on the laptop. Listen to your body at night, and reap the rewards during your awake life.

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