



The Surprising Benefits of Sleep

Are you and the other members of your family getting enough sleep? How do you know?

One of the best articles on healthy sleep can be found here: <http://jamesclear.com/better-sleep?hvid=4efDS>; it describes a study conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and Washington State University that prescribed different levels of sleep for four groups of healthy men and women. The first group had to stay awake for two days without sleeping. Group two slept for four hours a night for two weeks, while group three slept for six hours a night over the same time period. The final group was asked to sleep for eight hours a night.

When the researchers tested the different groups on their physical and mental performance, the volunteers who received a full eight hours of sleep showed no declines in their cognitive ability, attention or motor skills. They were, in other words, fully-functional, bright and chipper. Meanwhile, the groups who received four and six hours of sleep a night steadily declined in all categories with each passing day. After one week, 25% of the six-hour group began falling asleep at random times a day, and by the end of the two weeks, their performance deficits in all categories were the same as those who had stayed up for two days straight. The four-hour sleepers did even worse.

Interestingly, none of the volunteers noticed their own performance declines. When they graded themselves, they said that their performance might have declined for a few days, but then it tapered off--when in fact they were continuing to get worse each day. In the real world, symptoms of sleep deprivation totally ruins any potential benefits of skimping on sleep and working those additional hours.

The researchers, and others, concluded that, to operate at peak performance and stay healthy, 95% of adults need 7-9 hours of sleep each night. Yet at least 20% of Americans sleep fewer than six hours per night.

The article talks about the importance of slow wave (deep) sleep--which helps the body heal itself and recover from hard exercise--and REM (dreaming) sleep, which boosts your memory, facilitates learning and helps the brain's neurons grow. Both are important, and there is evidence that people who get sufficient sleep live longer in addition to performing better.

And so far, researchers have found no substitute for sleeping.