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The Health Benefits of Napping

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By Jane Langille | Posted March 2 2012

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What do Steve Nash, Lance Armstrong, and George W. Bush have in common? They all reap the benefits of an afternoon snooze.



It's no surprise that as we try to squeeze more into each day, we are chronically sleep deprived. About two-thirds of Americans report that they are not getting enough sleep during the week. Sleep needs are individual and can range from 5 to 9 hours, however a shortfall of even a half an hour a day can add up over a week to a sleep debt that can affect mood, mental alertness and performance.

Sleep expert [Sara C. Mednick, Ph.D.](#), author of *Take a Nap! Change Your Life*, has conducted several studies about the benefits of napping. In one [study](#) published in *Nature Neuroscience*, she and her colleagues found that a 60-90 minute nap could be as good as a full night's sleep for learning a visual perception skill. Another [study](#) published in *Behavioral Brain Research*

found that people who took naps performed better on word-recall tests than those who drank caffeine instead. So reaching for a cup of coffee to push through the afternoon slump may not be your best option.

Sleep experts have found that daytime naps can improve many things: increase alertness, boost creativity, reduce stress, improve perception, stamina, motor skills and accuracy, enhance your sex life, aid in weight loss, reduce the risk of heart attack, brighten your mood and boost memory. Companies like Google, P&G and Cisco recognize the health benefits of naps and provide special reclining chairs like [MetroNaps EnergyPods](#) where employees can reboot their productivity during the workday.

ABOUT OUR BLOG

Our blog is a collection of thoughts and stories that serve as inspiration for what healthymagination is—a shared commitment to creating better health for more people. It's written by the people behind healthymagination, as well as members of our advisory board and guest contributors from around the web.

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[7 Cool Health Club Trends](#)

Health club memberships in the U.S. have leveled out over the last 20 years while the obesity epidemic has ballooned. In light of this disparity, many health clubs are increasingly adopting unconventional programs to bolster their membership base and better motivate the marketplace to get fit, trim and healthy.



[Olympians' Edge: The Snacks of Champions](#)

While some male Olympians – can you say Michael Phelps? – devour a whopping 9-12,000 calories daily for endurance, many females power up with far lighter energy-boosting food. Here's a look at some star athletes' go-to snacks.



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"If I had known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself" goes the old saying. But recent research has shown it's no joke. A study published in *Circulation* has found that if people in their 20s make five lifestyle changes and stick to them, they will significantly reduce their risk of heart disease in middle age.

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So how long should you snooze and when is the best time to catch some Z's? "The benefits of a nap vary, because the kind of sleep you get depends on how long you nap and when you take the nap during the day," says Dr. Mednick, Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Riverside.

Power Nap

A 20-30 minute nap is best when you want to hit the reset button, feel more awake and mentally alert. A power nap consists of Stage 2 sleep, a light stage where you are unaware of your surroundings yet not too deeply asleep. Will a power nap shortchange a good night's sleep? No, it will not, but a longer nap of 1-2 hours in the middle of the day will.

60 Minute Nap

A 60 minute nap will include Stage 2 sleep followed by a half hour of slow-wave sleep, a deep state that is good for improving explicit memory – recalling things you are consciously trying to remember, like studying for an exam or your daily to-do list.

90 Minute Nap

In a 90 minute nap, you will complete an entire sleep cycle consisting of Stage 2 sleep, slow-wave sleep, and REM or rapid-eye movement sleep. REM sleep is good for improving creativity and implicit memory, which is used for tasks that don't require conscious remembering, such as riding a bicycle.

Nap at the right time of day

Sleep cycles change somewhat throughout the day. Morning naps contain more REM sleep and afternoon naps have more slow-wave sleep. Dr. Mednick offers a [Nap Wheel Tool](#) on her website so you can plan your "Ultimate Nap" to happen at a time when the amounts of slow-wave sleep and REM sleep are in balance. For example, the best naptime for a person who wakes at 7 am is at 2 pm.

Nap lying down if you can

A recent small [study](#) among regular power nappers in China suggests that while napping in a sitting position is better than no nap, taking a snooze lying down is the best position to restore alertness.

Daylight doesn't matter

While the presence of light can sabotage a good night's sleep, Dr. Mednick and her colleagues recently found in a small [study](#) that a light source at levels similar to moonlight, indoor lighting or even indirect outdoor light had no effect on people's ability to fall asleep or stay asleep in a daytime nap.

Afraid you will feel groggy when you wake up? "The trick is to nap for either half an hour so you don't get into slow-wave sleep, or if you have to sleep longer, sleep more than an hour so you get into REM sleep, to avoid that sleep inertia feeling when you wake up," says Dr. Mednick. 'There is no benefit to napping longer than 90-minutes, as you will only begin another sleep cycle. Further, if you take a snooze too late in the day, it will contain too much slow-wave sleep,' Dr. Mednick adds.

Need to lie down now and take a power nap? Go ahead – see you in 30 minutes!

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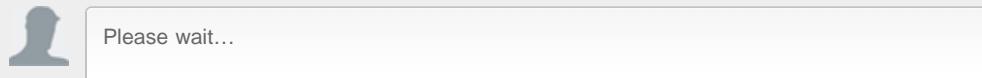
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Visit Dr. Mednick's website to learn more about her book, [Take a Nap! Change Your Life](#), and watch [videos](#), including her presentation to Google about the health benefits of naps. Did you know that some cities like Paris have [Nap Bars](#)? Read more about the health benefits of sleep in our posts, "[Stress Reduction and Sufficient Sleep Can Aid Weight Loss](#)" and "[Snooze Control: New App Tracks Sleep Habits](#)" — or this story from the *New York Times*, "[So You Think You Can Be a Morning Person?](#)"



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