

Smart Snoozing

Boost your brain power
and your energy with
a midday siesta.

BY RACHEL BUCCI

A power nap always seems like a fabulous idea and for most of us, it's just that: an idea. But it shouldn't stay that way.

According to researchers at NASA, a 30-minute nap can increase cognitive abilities by nearly 40 percent. In addition, naps have been shown to boost creativity, improve mood and even make up for lost sleep—good news for the more than 50 million people in the United States who, according to the National Sleep Foundation, suffer from sleep deprivation.

This statistic is especially relevant to women, says Dr. William Anthony, author of *The Art of Napping at Work*.

“Women are more sleep-deprived than men—they have the majority of household, child care and elder-care responsibilities and should be getting more sleep,” he says. “A good way to do this is by napping.”

And naps not only give your mind a boost, they also provide health benefits—from lowering stress hormone levels and blood pressure to reducing the risk of heart attack and stroke.

A short snooze can also eliminate the need for caffeine—another welcome health advantage.



Dr. Sara C. Mednick, author of *Take a Nap! Change Your Life*, says that without a midday rest, performance falls apart across the day.

“When you take a nap in the middle of the day, even a nap of a half hour, it can actually increase alertness and mental performance,” Mednick says.

Think of it as a mini vacation, a time to relax and rejuvenate. Here's how to make the most of your midday sleep session.



REST EASY

According to Anthony, making nap time a priority is a necessity, just like exercise. “Put it on your daily calendar,” he says.

And don’t feel guilty about it. “It’s hard to nap if you feel guilty. It’s not being lazy or slothful; it’s doing something that’s good for you. Taking a nap is better than having your dishes washed.”

FIT IT IN

While most people will feel best napping halfway through the day, what works for one person may not work for you, Anthony says.

“Everyone is different,” he says. “It’s really personal preference. There’s no one time for napping. Figure out what works best for you.”

Mednick suggests fitting some zzz’s in during your lunch break (drive to a local park and just recline your seat—you won’t be the only one) or after work. “A 10- or 20-minute nap on the couch will extend your day and make you more awake for the rest of the day,” she says.

SET UP YOUR SLUMBER

Find out what particular devices you need, Anthony says. Is it a darkened room? Your favorite afghan? Outfit your environment and focus on really going to sleep for that time period.

And while simply resting can make you feel better, it won’t harbor the same benefits as a real nap.

“There are still a lot of questions about why sleep is so beneficial and why we need it,” Anthony says. “But when you do sleep, your brain goes into a different mode.”

Even a brief nap of 20 minutes or less has been shown to have benefits that can last anywhere from one to 10 hours, he says. •

Nap Uninterrupted

When counting sheep fails, try using a simple distraction to help you drift into dreamland.

MAKE A LIST.

We’re not talking a to-do list here. Rather, make a mental list based on colors, such as green foods, or go through the alphabet, naming a city or even a celebrity for each letter.

TURN UP THE SOUND.

CDs featuring guided meditation or audio books can help distract and relax you into sleep, says Trish Bongaarts of the Minnesota Lung and Sleep Center. Bongaarts suggests listening with your eyes closed and envisioning what the reader is describing.

FOCUS ON BREATHING.

Ease your body into rest mode by counting out your breaths. Breathe in as you count to four, for example, and then breathe out, counting your exhale. The number of seconds doesn’t matter, just that you’re making each breath steady and calm. “It’s very soothing,” Bongaarts says.

Ask a Doctor

Anxiety is one of the most common roadblocks to napping. Dr. Matthew Edlund, founder of the West Coast Regional Sleep Disorders Center, helps us snooze more soundly by addressing common concerns.

How long should I sleep?

Around 10 to 30 minutes. “Naps beyond (that amount of time) tend to produce sleep inertia, the dullness and slowness seen when deeper stages of sleep are reached,” Edlund says.

I have a hard time waking up. Any tips or tricks to help rouse me?

Edlund suggests kitchen timers. They work like a charm, he says. Cell phone and watch alarms are also good alternatives. Even if you don’t sleep the 10 to 30 minutes advocated, you’re still

reaping benefits from just resting, he says.

What if I can only fit in a nap two to three times a week? Will it still benefit me?

Sure. Many people choose to take naps on the weekend, when they can find the time.

When is the best time for a nap?

Generally between 1 and 4 p.m., with morning larks on the earlier side and night owls on the later side. “People can usually feel when they’re most draggy in the afternoon, a good time for a nap,” Edlund says.