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FUEL YOUR MIND, BODY & SOUL

You Snooze, You Lose?
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By **Valerie Coulman**
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How often have you hit that post-lunch lull and wished you could put your head down for a quick snooze? In many nations around the world, a midday break is common when businesses and stores close and everyone gets a chance to relax. But in America, napping is often seen as an indulgence, says Dr. Sarah Mednick, research scientist at the University of California and author of *Take a Nap: Change Your Life*. "We're driving ourselves super hard - We're also the most stressed-out nation in the world. We have to balance our work and drive with healthier practices."

Not just for children, a nap can improve your alertness and stamina, level your moods, increase memory retention, and boost complex motor skills. Experts say it can also play a role in heart function, hormone maintenance and cell repair. And these benefits can begin in as little as five minutes!! But who has time for a nap?

Around the World in Forty Naps

Most people are familiar with the concept of a siesta, a short nap usually connected to the lunch hour or early afternoon. The siesta is practiced in Portugal, Spain, the Philippines, Malta and by much of

Latin America. In many of these countries, businesses are closed for two to four hours in the afternoon to accommodate the siesta.

Other countries around the world, including those of the Middle East, China, India, North Africa, Greece, Bangladesh and Italy, also take a midday rest. Some say it is due to the intense midday heat of those countries, but others think it may be the result of having the largest meal of the day in the early afternoon — both guaranteed to produce drowsiness!

Lately, there has been a renewed interest in the midday nap in some countries. Japan has begun to establish "nap salons" in some of its larger cities and some companies even cover the salon fees as a health benefit. Japanese high schools are beginning to institute a 15-minute afternoon nap for all their students in order to promote mental alertness. China's midday rest is a Constitutional right. And even in the U.S., a company called MetroNaps offers facilities for New Yorkers to grab a few winks.

The key, says Tanya Breshears, respiratory therapist with Advance Sleep Disorder Center in Medford, is in the timing. In fact, less may be more when you just want to increase your energy level or alertness during the day. "There are those, like me, that benefit more from a power nap." A power nap — typically 20 to 30 minutes — is something most people can fit into a lunch hour. "In the same time it takes to make coffee, you could have a nap," says Mednick, producing the same increased alertness and productivity without interfering with your nighttime sleep. And since most people experience a low-energy period around lunch time (or six to eight hours after waking), a bite to eat and a nap make perfect sense.

Mednick's research into napping has shown that different amounts of sleep benefit different cognitive and motor skills. Because your body stays in the earlier stages of sleep during a power nap, it is easy to wake up alert and rested, ideal for a physical laborer, for example. For someone facing complex mental processing, like a student, a longer nap will yield more benefits. Mednick compares sleeping for 50 to 60 minutes to "clearing the desktop" as the brain clears many of the multi-tasking connections it forms during complex mental tasks. And a full-cycle nap, usually about 90 minutes, boosts perceptual skills and creativity in the REM (Rapid Eye Movement) stage.

Ready to try? Mednick recommends finding a quiet, safe and comfortable ("not too comfortable") spot. "A lot of people nap in their cars," she observes. "It's a perfect place to not sleep for too long." A comfortable sofa, a reclining chair or even a pillow on the floor will also work. A light blanket can be handy, as body temperature tends to drop during sleep. Then set an alarm for 20 to 30 minutes (especially important for people napping in a work situation) and quiet your mind. Some people use eyeshades, dim lights or soft music to create a soothing atmosphere. It may take a few attempts, but even the relaxation will benefit you, and you may be surprised to find you've slept after all.

"You can learn how to eat well and exercise well," says Mednick. "You can also learn to nap well."

Everyone is physically able to nap, but nappers occasionally have difficulty waking feeling rested. Called sleep inertia, that groggy feeling following a nap comes from waking during Slow Wave Sleep, says Mednick, who recommends either shortening or lengthening your nap time to avoid waking during that phase of sleep. "It's harder when you get into a deeper sleep. It's harder to wake up raring to go," confirms Breshears. A splash of cold water or some quick exercise should help clear the fog.

Both Mednick and Breshears say that 90 minutes should be the limit for a daytime nap. "Typically, I would say that anything over an hour to an hour and a half is too much," says Breshears. Mednick adds, "You don't want to be napping within three hours of your night sleep time or beyond 90

minutes."

So next time you find yourself drowsy in the daytime, find a quiet spot, set the alarm - and happy dreams.

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