

Short snooze can do you good

BY R.J. IGNELZI COPLEY NEWS SERVICE

Prepping for an important business meeting? Cramming for a history exam? Training for an upcoming half-marathon?

Good time to curl up and take a nap.

The only thing you lose when you take a short snooze is inefficiency, a lax memory, dull wit and a little clumsiness.

"Napping can make you more productive at work and home," says Sara Mednick, a psychologist and sleep researcher at Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego, who estimates that between 40 percent and 60 percent of the world's adult population naps during the day. "After a nap, you can expect to perform better on tasks requiring memorization, creative insight, complex motor skills and muscular precision."

Mednick recently conducted a study comparing the ability of nappers and non-nappers to learn a computer game. The two groups, both of which averaged 7.5 hours sleep a night, were taught a game and then tested on their skills once in the morning and again at 4 p.m. The napping group snoozed at 1 p.m. before repeating the test. The study, published in *Nature Neuroscience*, found that the nappers' mastery of the game was 50 percent greater than that of the non-nappers.

"Even when someone is getting normal nocturnal sleep (averaging about seven hours a night), they can do even better on memory tests with a nap," Mednick says. "Normal sleepers who don't nap are not able to remain at optimal performance all day long."

TAILOR NAP TO YOUR NEEDS

What benefits you derive from napping all depends on how long you sleep.

"You should tailor your naps to meet your needs," Mednick says.

If you simply want to be more alert and have more energy and stamina, a 15- to 20-minute power nap is all you need.

Have to memorize a speech or remember dates or formulas for a test? Sleep a bit longer — 30 to 40 minutes — to get some slow-wave sleep, the deepest stage of sleep.

"Slow-wave sleep is very restorative," Mednick says. "It's good if you're under a lot of stress



Copley News Service David Brooks

Martial artist Brandon Vera takes a nap on the bleachers before one of his three matches at the Pan Am Games in Carson, Calif.

and helps to relieve a 'full mind.' "

However, letting yourself fall into slow-wave sleep can throw off your normal nighttime sleep schedule.

"If you wake up in the middle of slow-wave sleep, it's so deep that it can be jarring to wake up. It's called sleep inertia," Mednick says. "The solution is to sleep for a shorter amount of time or a longer amount of time so you wake in stage 2, or in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep."

If you want to work on creative endeavors or improve perceptual skills like practicing the piano, you need an even longer nap — about 40 to 60 minutes — to get to REM sleep.

"REM sleep is when you dream, and is a very light sleep and one of the last stages of sleep," Mednick says. "REM helps you make lots of new connections in the brain, letting you put new ideas together."

You don't have to be sleep-deprived to gain benefits from a nap. Many normal sleepers use napping as a tool to be more alert and do better at their jobs. Cyclist Lance Armstrong is a devoted napper, who uses his napping to help him with his training regimen and physical endurance.

Other famous nappers include Winston Churchill, Thomas Edison, John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton.

However, the problem with frequent napping is that it may be masking a medical problem.

"If you have a sleep debt and need to function well during the day, planned naps can help. But, if you have a co-existing problem, such as sleep apnea (or restless leg syndrome) or other problems, you don't want to compensate by napping all the time," says Dr. Lawrence Kline, medical director for the Scripps Sleep Clinic in San Diego.

He suggests seeking medical attention if you don't fall asleep easily between 10 p.m. and midnight, wake up during the night and are sleepy most of the day even with a nap.

Can't find your napping niche? Just as you can learn to meditate, it's possible to learn to nap.

First, make sure your timing is right. The best time for most people to nap is between 1 and 3 p.m. You should not nap two to three hours before bedtime.

"After lunch, the body's temperature takes a natural dip and we feel a little sleepy. It's the perfect time for a nap," says Ellie Hoey, senior sleep technologist at Sharp-Grossmont Hospital Sleep Disorder Center in San Diego.

It's important to make sure you're in a relaxing environment. Close the door to your office (or ask to "borrow" a co-worker's office while they're at lunch), push back your car seat, or snuggle into your favorite easy chair. Turn down the lights, use earplugs, turn off your cell phone and set an alarm if you fear oversleeping.

Try visualizing a tranquil scene until you feel your mind unwind. Slow down your breathing and relax your muscles, starting with your toes and gradually working up to your head, until there's no tension left in your body.

"You've got to practice. When people say they've tried napping and can't, I tell them to keep

trying because it's really beneficial," says Mednick.

A napper for years, she used to nap in her office in the middle of the day. Now, she finds it more restorative to go to her next appointment early and nap in her car for 15 or 20 minutes.

"Afterward, I feel a million times better," she says. "It clears the day and allows me to move on to the next thing fully alert."

Although Americans are becoming more accepting of daytime snoozing, this country has been behind the curve when it comes to napping. In Japan, napping is huge, with employers offering rooms devoted to employees' afternoon slumber.

"In that culture, napping is considered a tool to help you work harder and longer," Mednick says.

While Spain has always been considered the capital of daytime dozing, it's the Germans who are the biggest nappers. A study in the journal *Neurology* reported that one in five Germans naps three times a week and another 4 percent nap twice a day.

"Our world is so sleep-deprived that America is finally changing its mind about napping," says Mednick, who's been working with the U.S. Defense Department on "using napping as a fatigue countermeasure and integrating napping into Army (routines)."

"Napping is no longer just a sleepy siesta. Targeted napping is now for the healthy, productive society."

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This page was created June 6, 2006

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