

SLEEP BETTER TONIGHT!
BY DR. TOM HYLAND ROBERTSON

Depriving ourselves of shuteye has become a point of pride with Americans. President Bill Clinton claims to thrive on 5 or 6 hours of sleep a night. If one of the most powerful men in the world can manage on so little, surely the rest of us should be able to do the same, right?

Only if you want to put your health at risk! The consequences of sleep deprivation on our well-being are dramatic. Sleep affects mental functioning and memory as well as overall physical health—less sleep equals higher odds of developing diabetes, more difficulty maintaining a healthy weight, increased lower back pain, and greater risk of heart disease. (Let's not forget Mr. Clinton's quadruple bypass surgery a few years back.)

And disturbingly, a study published in August 2009 indicates that women who don't sleep enough are even more likely to have cardiovascular problems than male insomniacs. Even short-term sleep problems increase some of these health risks.

If you don't wake up feeling refreshed, or if you experience moodiness or trouble concentrating, you're probably not getting quality sleep—you might be tossing and turning more than you realize. To get a good night's rest, take a look at your sleep habits.

GOOD POSTURE IS IMPORTANT 24 HOURS A DAY

Avoid sleeping on your stomach. In this position, your neck is crunched to the side, a pillow will push your jaw and head backward, your entire spine is twisted, and often your shoulder, arm, hip, and knee are in awkward positions. Try this trick to break yourself of the stomach-sleeping habit: Knot a new tennis ball inside the front of your t-shirt using a rubber band. When you start to roll onto your belly, the ball will be uncomfortable, triggering you to wake up just enough to consciously choose to roll onto your back or side. It's a simple solution, but it will take time to work—stick with it for a couple of months.

Spending the majority of the night on your back is best. If this bothers your back, place a pillow under your knees. If you've been to a Restorative Yoga class at Whole Yoga Healthcare, our yoga/pilates studio, you'll know how much we like to support the body with props when appropriate. Use them when on your side as well—try a pillow between the knees to keep the low back and hips in proper alignment. Or use a long body pillow beside you for support and to keep you in place.

When sleeping on your side, avoid having your hands—or worse, arms—under your pillow. If you feel the need to prop up your head like this, you need a more supportive pillow. (If you often wake up with numbness or tingling in your arms, hands, or shoulders, you may have an underlying condition that should be evaluated by a doctor.)

Consider getting a contour-shaped orthopedic foam pillow. It doesn't have to be "memory foam," but it should support your neck in a neutral posture while sleeping on your side or back (ask your chiropractor if you're not sure). Not every pillow fits everyone, so use a utility knife to cut yours to a size that feels good to you.

Additional simple steps include proper supplementation—a qualified doctor can tell you whether you might benefit from additional calcium or magnesium, for example—and removing allergy triggers from your room. Minimize overall systemic inflammation by ditching old rugs, stuffed animals, down pillows—anything that might collect dust over the years (including, unfortunately, your mattress). Sleep tight—or even better, sleep relaxed!

Dr. Tom Hyland Robertson earned his Doctor of Chiropractic degree from National College of Chiropractic (now NUHS) near Chicago. During his undergraduate and postgraduate studies, he focused on human biology and nutrition, as well as Eastern disciplines such as acupuncture and reiki. He combines these disciplines to treat a wide array of conditions. With his wife Laurie, Dr. Robertson founded Whole Chiropractic Healthcare in 2007 to bring effective alternative healing to the Anne Arundel and Ft. Meade communities.