



JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW EVERYTHING ABOUT SLEEP, THE RULES HAVE CHANGED, WRITES EVELYN LEWIN.

**S**leep. We're not getting enough of it, yet we're so hard on ourselves when we try to sneak in some extra shut-eye. We berate ourselves for nodding off in front of a movie, snoozing past dawn or slinking to bed for an afternoon catnap.

Melbourne-based sleep physician and the co-founder of SleepHub, Dr David Cunnington, says it's time to lighten up our attitudes towards sleep. "Often we feel too guilty about sleep and apply too many rules to it."

He says we tell ourselves we can only sleep under "perfect" circumstances; in the right place, at the right time. But, he explains, that thinking "can increase our anxiety about sleep itself and lead to sleep problems". Seems like those golden sleep rules just aren't as shiny anymore.

**Napping** Often viewed as a naughty indulgence, napping is more than just a way to feel refreshed. New research,

published online in the Endocrine Society's *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism* in February, studied the hormone levels of sleep-deprived men. They found that napping helped to relieve stress and boost the immune system.

While napping can help our hormones recover, we often avoid it for fear of ruining our night's sleep. Thankfully, that's not how it works. Think of it like eating a cake: you still get the whole cake, you're just taking a slice earlier. "So if we have a long nap, say for an hour during the day, a reasonable expectation would be that we would sleep an hour less that night," explains Cunnington.

The only exception is for chronic insomniacs, he says: when they nap, they become even less tired than usual that night, which further impedes their ability to fall asleep. Thus a "vicious cycle" forms, where a nap is needed the next day to compensate.

**Sleeping in** Many of us worry that by enjoying a weekend sleep-in, we're messing with our internal clocks. We needn't fret, says Cunnington. "For most people – those without a sleep disorder such as insomnia or delayed sleep phase [syndrome] – it's okay to sleep in whenever they get the opportunity."

In fact, it's more than just okay to miss sunrise; new research shows that sleeping in can be good for your heart. A study published in the journal *Clinical Endocrinology* last month found that insulin sensitivity improved in men who didn't sleep much during the week but had "catch-up" sleep on the weekend.

Sleep deprivation messes with insulin sensitivity because it activates the "fight or flight" mechanism, says Cunnington, causing glucose to be released into the bloodstream. "Long-term, these higher glucose levels and the metabolic changes that go with them – such as insulin sensitivity – increase the risk of cardiovascular disease such as heart attacks and strokes as well as the risk of developing diabetes," he explains.

**How much do we need?** While we all know the perils of not sleeping enough (from weight gain to impaired memory and plain old exhaustion), sleeping too much may also be a problem, according to a recent study published in *Neurology*.

The study examined more than 9000 people and found that those who slept more than eight hours a night had an increased risk of stroke. This risk rose further for older people who persistently slept more than average. Whether the longer sleep might be a symptom or a cause of stroke susceptibility is unclear.

But don't beat yourself up if you're not getting enough sleep, or having more than your fair share. Cunnington says that many factors determine how much sleep we each need: "None of us is exactly the same, so everyone's sleep [needs] are different." So unless you're bucking all the rules completely, you can pretty much sleep easy.

#### THE NEW DAILY SLEEP GUIDELINES\*

Newborns (0-3 months): 14-17 hours  
Infants (4-11 months): 12-15 hours  
Toddlers (1-2 years): 11-14 hours  
Preschoolers (3-5): 10-13 hours  
School-age children (6-13): 9-11 hours  
Teenagers (14-17): 8-10 hours  
Young adults (18-25): 7-9 hours  
Adults (26-64): 7-9 hours  
Older adults (65+): 7-8 hours

\*From the US National Sleep Foundation.