The 41st Wink
Better Sleep For Life

SLEEP IN THE TIME OF COVID

Unlike 'Love in the Time of Cholera', this article is not a saga of unrequited love, but rather a saga of can we please get our zzz's back!

We can thank the Romans for the term "getting up on the wrong side of the bed." They believed that awakening on the left side would bring you bad luck, but we're more likely to use this term to a general lack of sleep and feeling out of sorts.

Unfortunately, it's not superstition: most of us suffer from the odd restless night. We might be worried about work, puzzling over a problem, planning for the day ahead, feeling uncomfortable, or just having one of those nights. But during the last year, a dark COVID-19 shaped cloud hovered over many of our heads as we tried to sleep.

It was an unprecedented global pandemic that played havoc with our day-to-day lives, as well as our night-time routines. The virus took its toll in a number of ways, impacting our sleep quantity, sleeping timing and even our dreams.

How has COVID-19 brought about such a negative change? Let's find out.

Amount of Sleep

A number of recent studies have explored how much we've slept since the pandemic arrived. Sleep-tracking company Evidation Health carried out research involving 68,000 US participants, each armed with a fitness tracker. The research monitored how people were feeling, moving, and how they slept during the lockdown period. The data suggested that people were moving less and sleeping more, with total total sleep time increasing across the U.S. by 20%.

This data is complemented by other studies, including two peer-reviewed papers from Current Biology. The research focused on German, Austrian, and Swiss citizens, examining the difference between the sleep achieved during the week versus sleep at the weekend.

The data implied that the total amount of sleep had increased by 13 minutes. It also suggested that the conflict between external social time and our bodies' internal biological time, known informally as "social jet lag" (SJL), had decreased.

SJL was coined in 2006 by Til Roenneberg, a German professor of chronobiology. It occurs when our sleep patterns alter drastically. We can use teenagers as a good example: they tend to enjoy staying up as late as possible on the weekends, only to compensate with subsequent late, lazy mornings.

This allows for plenty of sleep, but when Monday rolls around again, teens must revert to a weekday pattern of rising earlier and going to bed earlier. SJL describes the feeling of tiredness or "jet lag" that can occur when we switch between the two.

Of course, SJL doesn't just apply to sleepy teens. It can affect anyone who generally follows a pattern of early weekday rising/sleeping versus weekend lie-ins and late bedtimes. Most of us have busy weekdays to negotiate; we get up early to take the kids to school, we work hard, and then we face a long commute home. Weekends tend to be more relaxing and leisurely. We often take this opportunity to make up for lost sleep.

Since the arrival of COVID-19, this pattern has shifted. The pandemic has prompted individuals to change the way they work, and alter their daily routines and habits. People are not duty-bound by the same weekday obligations. Lockdown has closed schools and businesses; some people are working from home and others are not working at all. The potential to sleep properly has increased dramatically, and weekends are no longer used to play "catch up."

However, though we have the opportunity to sleep longer hours, it doesn't necessarily follow that sleep quality has increased. In fact, the Current Biology study already mentioned indicates a decrease in sleep quality for a subset of participants. This could be for a variety of reasons, but one of the main culprits might be COVID-19.

The data indicates that the onset of a global pandemic has caused people to change the way they act and operate. It implies that for some, both the amount and quality of sleep have increased, but we know that this isn't the case for everyone.

COVID-19 has brought uncertainty and heartache. With illness, job woes, the death of loved ones, and general anxiety about what lies ahead, people are tossing and turning at night. Overall, our physical activity has reduced and we have less mental stimulation, two activities that wear us out. Without these activities, we can find ourselves going to bed without actually feeling tired, which leads to poor rest quality.