



SLEEP ON IT

Skip the gym tonight and hit the pillow instead for a stronger, fitter body (yes, you read that right!)

YOU'VE BEEN RACING FROM SPIN CLASS to the weights room to yoga and you've made friends with kale smoothies and beetroot shots, but you're still lagging behind in your running group and you've had it. Ah, what gives?

According to master sleep coach Elina Winnel (mysleepcoach.com.au), you might need to back off the treadmill and spend some quality time in bed instead. For reals.

"You can have the perfect nutrition and training regimen," Winnel explains, "but if your sleep isn't right, you're missing a vital element of your fitness trifecta."

Sure, you already know that factoring in regular downtime is important for your fitness gains, but an *effective* recovery session equates to much more than just taking a day off from the gym to watch back-to-back *Gossip Girl* re-runs.

"If you want to get the most out of your exercise routine, you need to plan your sleep as carefully as your training sessions," says Kate Kraschnefski, Queensland training manager at the Australian Institute of Fitness. "Sleep is essential for the body to repair adequately and rid itself of the toxins that were created during exercise," she adds. "We also release human growth hormone (HGH) while we sleep, which helps us build and maintain lean muscle mass. Without adequate sleep, your body will remain in a state of heightened stress, which will impact your performance

“If your sleep isn’t right, you’re missing a vital element of your fitness trifecta”

during subsequent training and your overall energy levels as well as create an environment where your cells are more likely to hold on to fat reserves.”

So, that means if you’re guilty of Insta-scrolling till the early hours of the morning then dragging your weary bod out of bed at 5.30am for a workout (because you’ve got fitness goals to meet, dammit!), you’re setting yourself an even bigger hurdle than you bargained for.

Good timing

Permission to indulge in a snooze fest, officially granted. But what’s the magic number when it comes to your nightly shut-eye? Well, it all depends how hard you’re hitting the gym during the day. “The ideal amount of sleep is between seven-and-a-half and eight-and-a-half hours a night,” says Winnel. “Athletes and people who are really into fitness need up to two more hours’ sleep than that. But, on average, people get between six-and-a-half and seven-and-a-half hours. As a society, we’re suffering from partial sleep deprivation. The brain adjusts so you think you’re okay, but your mental acuity, mood, productivity and workout performance are lower.”

And it’s not just a matter of logging more hours under the doona, but making sure you’re getting quality slumber so your body can do the repair work it needs after a tough training sesh.

“HGH is released during the deep phases of sleep, so if you’re a light sleeper you won’t get as much of this important muscle-building hormone,” Winnel explains. “Then you have testosterone, which is just as important for exercise gains in women as it is in men, and that’s dependent on the duration of your sleep. So you have these two really critical hormones, one that relies on the depth or quality of your sleep and the other on the duration or quantity.”

Get the ratio right and you’ll score some sweet returns for your trouble – think more energy, better workout performance and a leaner, happier bod.

SLEEP SKILLS

Your next fitness mission? Instead of heading to bed and hoping for the best, become a skilled sleeper so you can reap the rewards every time you hit the pillow. “If you’re serious about your fitness, sleep skills can really serve you,” says Winnel. Here’s her guide to a quality snooze sesh...

#1 STRESS LESS “A racing mind is a main cause of sleep issues these days, so learn some relaxation techniques and reduce your stress levels,” says Winnel. “Try to have some relaxation time during the day so your brain remembers how to go there at night. The more cortisol [stress hormone] you have in your system, the less you’ll sleep.”

Building a wind-down routine into your evening is crucial here. “Some people work until they go to bed and expect to drift off to sleep right away, but that doesn’t work,” explains Winnel. “Establish a wind-down routine where you genuinely switch off from your day.”

#2 BE CREATIVE While the theory that the left brain is analytical and the right brain is creative has been called into question in recent years, Winnel believes that integrating both sides of the brain by engaging in creative activities that stimulate the neglected right side can lead to a good night’s sleep. “You can achieve this through painting, drawing or even trying to cook something new without following a recipe,” she tips.

#3 HAVE A LOL “Having a laugh with friends during the day produces [the ‘feel-good’ chemical] serotonin,” says Winnel. “The serotonin then turns into [the sleep hormone] melatonin at night, so the more we have of both, the better we’ll sleep.”

#4 GET IN SYNC When you work out, try doing some exercises that use alternating sides of the body. According to Winnel, this

can also help synchronise your brain hemispheres and improve your slumber. Try walking, running, high knees or alternating lifting weights on one side and the other.

#5 CLOCK OFF For some people, exercising at night can cause sleeplessness. “Because your body temperature drops as you sleep, the rise in your core temperature after working out in the evening can make it difficult to fall asleep,” says Winnel. “If this is an issue for you, try to [finish your workout] at least two hours before you go to bed.”

#6 BEAT THE BLUE LIGHT You’ve probably heard that you should avoid using computers and devices before bedtime, but Winnel knows that isn’t realistic for most of us. “If you’re going to use them, you can download an app that blocks out the blue light on the screen,” she says. “Blue light signals to the brain that it’s daytime and affects the production of the sleep hormone melatonin.”

While there are apps such as F.lux for your computer and Twilight for Android, Apple doesn’t allow apps that make system-wide changes. The best you can do on your iPhone or iPad is to turn down the brightness or invert the colours in your settings.

#7 AVOID SLEEPING TABLETS Think twice about popping a pill. “They change your sleep architecture so you typically won’t get as much of that deep sleep where human growth hormone is released,” says Winnel. “Try to get natural shut-eye instead. If you’re having trouble, get help from a sleep coach.”