

Ready for a nap? Taking the perfect quick snooze

By Aaron Warnick

Have you ever thought, “I’ll just close my eyes for a second,” and then woken up much later? If so, you’re not alone.

From infants to adults to seniors, napping is a basic part of human life. In fact, it’s a central part of life for a lot of animals — which in the end, humans are. Felines are so notorious

for their sleep habits that the word “catnap” is named for them.

A nap can be defined as a brief period of sleep that

happens outside your normal sleep cycle, says Timothy Morgenthaler, MD, a sleep medicine specialist at the Mayo Clinic, but “I’m not sure I’ve ever read an official, agreed-upon international definition of a nap.”

Napping can help you feel refreshed and alert or more drowsy, depending on where, when or how long you do it. The key is figuring out what makes a perfect, healthy nap for you.

Naptime for kids

Napping is common for children, especially babies. Newborns will take three to four naps a day, spending about 16 hours a day sleeping. That changes as they get older.

Between birth and age 5 or so, sleep patterns change. By about age 2, children don’t usually require those bouts of daytime sleep. Which is why some of them can start resisting naptime.

Studies have found that naptime for toddlers can disrupt their regular nightly sleep, keeping them awake later. When they nap during the day, it might be to make up for lost sleep.

So, are naps for toddlers necessary? Strictly speaking, no, according to sleep experts. “It’s more of an agreement between the parents and kids about what works the best for both people’s energy levels,”

says Morgenthaler, a past president of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

But if your child wants a nap and it doesn’t disrupt their sleep cycle, go ahead and let them take a snooze during the day. Be consistent so that they get used to a regular sleep routine.



>> For more information on naps and healthy sleep, visit www.aasm.org

Naptime for adults

For adults, there are many reasons to take a nap. Perhaps the most common reason is to recover from sleep loss. Adults usually need somewhere between seven and nine hours of regular sleep. Teenagers and pregnant women require more.

If you miss that target, you’re going to have a “sleep debt” — where your body and mind are fatigued because you’re missing sleep.

It can be caused by a single night of disrupted sleep, or build up after a lot of missed shut-eye.

People who have a cold can nap a lot, as their body is working hard to fight off infection.

Napping is also really common after surgery. Too much napping can also be a sign of depression, sleep apnea or an undiagnosed illness,

so be sure to mention it to your doctor.

But sometimes you don’t need a reason to nap. Some people just enjoy naps. Napping in the afternoon is built into many cultures around the world, such as the Spanish tradition of a post-lunch siesta.

“Naps can be a pleasant way to spend some time,” Morgenthaler says, “They’re low stress and recharge those batteries and there are some great benefits.”

A good nap can lead to increased alertness, cognitive performance and reaction times.

Recipe for a great nap

So what makes the perfect nap? The ideal quick doze is between 10 and 20 minutes. Short naps are most commonly found to be satisfying and provide immediate cognitive benefits. If you’re someone who takes a while

to nod off, factor that into your nap break time.

It’s important not to overdo it, though. Longer naps, between 30 and 60 minutes, come with increased risk of sleep inertia. You might wake up feeling groggy and sluggish. If you missed out on a lot of sleep the night before, long naps can help pay off your sleep debt, but you might not be operating at peak performance after your snooze break. And it may be harder to fall asleep later that night.

The timing of your nap depends on your regular sleep schedule. If

you’re napping because you didn’t get enough sleep, early in the day could have the best impact. If you’re getting regular sleep at night, early afternoon — around 2 p.m. — would likely be the best time to get a quick recharge, Morgenthaler says.

So the next time you feel like you need a break, find a quiet corner, close your eyes and take some healthy extra shut-eye.



Seniors benefit from naps

Among adults, napping is especially beneficial for seniors, as they often sleep more lightly and wake up more often during the night.

An hour-long nap in the afternoon has been shown to boost memory and thinking skills in older adults. So if you’re in your golden years, don’t feel guilty about taking 40 winks. You’re doing your brain and body good!

If you find yourself nodding off frequently throughout the day, though, you should talk to your health care team. They may want to review the medications you’re taking or talk to you about ways to improve your sleep habits. It’s never a bad idea to talk to your doctor about your health needs.



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