

Warfighter Physical Optimization and Weight Management: What's Sleep Got to Do With It?

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U.S. Navy Photo by Mass Communications Specialist 1st Class Peter Blair

What is the problem?

Sleep has wide-ranging effects on performance and overall health and well-being. With an average of 60% of Warfighters getting less than 6 hours of sleep per night,² it's important to know that research shows there is a higher risk of weight gain and obesity with decreased sleep. Yes, that's right, lack of sleep can increase the waistline!

- Sleepy people tend to be hungrier. When you don't get enough sleep, your hormones send confusing signals to your body. The hormone that controls hunger (ghrelin) increases, while there is a decrease in the hormone (leptin) that makes you feel full. As a result, you have increased cravings for food that are high in carbohydrates and fat.
- You are not eating while you sleep (unless in your dreams), so being up late means that you have more time to eat and a higher chance of late-night snacking.
- Since you are tired during the day, you are less active and can't exercise properly.
- Decreased physical activity and increased intake in calories results in weight gain.
- Lack of sleep slows down your metabolism and increases belly fat and the risk of diabetes.
- People with late bedtimes may consume more calories and be at a higher risk for weight gain. Early birds may be more likely to maintain weight loss when compared to night owls.

Who is at risk?

People of all ages, races and ethnicities who do not get a consistent and regular amount of sleep due to job or school responsibilities, psychological reasons or chronic illness leading to sleep deprivation. As described above, ultimately, sleep impacts your weight and your chance of becoming overweight or obese, which will significantly affect your military career.^{1,2,3}

Prevention Tips

Sleep is like nutrition for the brain and is an integral part of the body's recovery process. Research has shown that increasing the amount and quality of sleep has been associated with weight management and even weight loss. These will vary for each person, but sleep is so important for your body's rest and regeneration – it is a “re-set” for the body.¹



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Simple sleep tips to help with managing your weight:

1. Keep to a regular sleep schedule. Big swings in your sleep schedule can reduce insulin sensitivity, which increases your blood glucose levels and changes your metabolism.
2. Find out when you are at your best during the day (are you a morning person or a night owl?) and establish regular times to go to bed and wake up consistently, even on weekends.
3. Your stomach and digestive system need rest too, so set up times for you to eat (i.e., don't eat after 8 p.m.). Being strategic about your eating times will go a long way toward managing your weight
4. Don't snack in bed; keep your bedroom for sleep and sex only.
5. Another reason to keep your bedroom dark – exposure to artificial light at night increases risk of weight gain.
6. Stress can lead to increased eating, but sleeping well helps reduce stress. Work on lowering stress and developing coping skills.
7. Cut back on the sugar. Sodas that are high in sugar appear to bypass the body's normal fullness cues. Replace one sugary drink like regular soda with water or a zero-calorie seltzer and you'll avoid about 10 teaspoons of sugar. Add lemon, mint or frozen fruit for flavor and fun.
8. Limit alcohol intake before bedtime. Drinking alcohol late at night can affect your sleep. When an occasion includes alcohol, follow the first drink with a nonalcoholic, low-calorie beverage like sparkling water instead of moving directly to another cocktail, beer or glass of wine. Alcohol has more calories per gram (7) than carbohydrates (4) or protein (4) and you are also more likely to mindlessly snack on foods you would normally limit (e.g., chips, candy, cookies).
9. Talk to your physician about these tips or to get additional recommendations to help you eat and sleep better.

Plan of the Week (POW):

Our Warfighters may be all too familiar with the impact that sleep can have on their performance as well as their daily routine. However, they may not realize that lost or poor sleep also has a huge effect on weight. Weight gain can cause sleep apnea and other health-related issues that ruin sleep and lead to obesity. Ultimately, lack of sleep does have an impact on weight and how the body metabolizes and digests food, as well as appetite and food choices. Sleep loss impacts all areas of a Warfighter's life – at home, work or on a mission. Sleep is a must-have for overall weight management and good health. To ensure a successful military career, sleep should not be compromised.

1. Maintain a consistent, regular sleep routine even on weekends to ensure your schedule allows for 7 - 9 hours of sleep per night.
2. Set up times to eat throughout the day according to your schedules and have healthy snacks available to avoid eating junk food.

References

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