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The secrets of sleep

How much sleep do we really need?

The amount of time you need to spend asleep depends on your age.

Infants sleep much of the day, adults only need between seven and eight hours.

Over-65s tend to sleep even less and in many cases never even enter the deepest stage of sleep (called slow-wave sleep).

The reason for these differences is unclear but some scientists speculate that sleep is important for brain development.

Fascinatingly, the decline in deep sleep during older age predicts degeneration of the brain and cognitive impairment, so it seems likely that these deep stages are necessary to keep the brain in good shape.

Efficient sleepers fall asleep faster and often spend a greater amount of time in highly restorative deep sleep even if their total sleep time is less.

A good example was the late Margaret Thatcher, who was said to have run the country on only four hours of sleep a night.

Neuroscientist PENNY LEWIS unravels some of the mysteries surrounding our slumber

How does sleep deprivation affect us?

In the chaos of modern society, sleep is often timed to fit around our busy schedules or, in the worst case, completely neglected. This means many of us are chronically sleep-deprived.

A sleep-deprived brain acts like a brain under the influence of alcohol and every five hours you spend awake is roughly equivalent to consuming one alcoholic beverage in terms of how your brain will perform.

Besides being cognitively feeble, our mood also suffers from an acute lack of sleep. When overtired, we tend to see

everything in a more negative light and to feel less positive about ourselves and other people.

Sleep deprivation can also impair moral judgment and having too little sleep over a long period of time can take a huge toll on your health.

Regular sleep deprivation will leave you more likely to fall ill and much more likely to suffer from poor memory and mood fluctuations. Of course you will probably also feel dreadful so skimping on sleep is a bad idea.

Why do some people suffer from insomnia?

There is no single cause of insomnia. People have trouble falling and staying asleep for numerous reasons.

To sleep well, our brains must maintain a fairly strict chemical balance and this can easily be disturbed by anything from stress to a cup of tea.

People suffering from mental illness such as depression, anxiety or schizophrenia are often plagued by insomnia. The use of recreational drugs, alcohol

and even too many caffeinated drinks can prevent you from getting a good night's sleep.

If you check the side effects of prescription medicines you will find insomnia is a usual suspect. Also, people sometimes think they are awake most of the night when really they are sleeping well.

Can sleeping on a problem really help us solve it?

Even though we don't consciously think about our conundrums while asleep, our brains are working on them nevertheless.

Sleep not only strengthens individual memories it also helps us to integrate new information with old and to extract common themes from repeated experiences.

This can help us to become explicitly aware of rules and sequences of actions which we might not have otherwise picked up on.

Think of a situation in which you always have to make a similar series of movements that you may not have really

thought about, such as a dance or shooting a goal in football. Sleep can help you to become explicitly aware of what you would otherwise have carried out without thinking.

Sleep is also thought to help us deal with our emotions.

Some experts argue that sleep can disarm dangerous emotions, stripping away the upsetting aspects of traumatic memories so they are not so evocative when we think of them the next day.

Could sleep be a way of improving memory?

There is strong evidence that memories are strengthened through sleep. Our brains replay our daytime experiences while we snooze and this is thought to firm up memory representations.

This is normally a spontaneous process. We can't tell our brains to strengthen that Spanish vocabulary while we sleep, or replay the details of the latest happenings on Neighbours.

But exciting new research has developed a way to strengthen the memories we are interested



in while we snooze. This is done through associations.

So smelling a particular scent while studying Spanish verbs, then smelling that same scent again at certain points during the night, will trigger the replay of those target memories, resulting in a score of 100 per cent (or at least better than usual).

● Penny Lewis is a neuroscientist at Manchester University and author of *The Secret World Of Sleep* (Palgrave Macmillan, £17.99).

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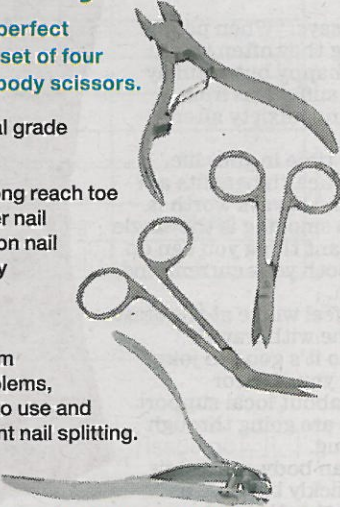
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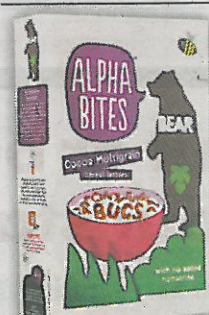
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