

May 2015 | www.mindbodygreen.com | Rosie Osmun | Health & Wellness

What's More Important: Exercise or Sleep?



You know that getting enough sleep and getting enough exercise are both essential for good health. But when you're short on time or are feeling tired, is it still worth waking up extra early so you can squeeze in a workout? You're probably hoping the answer is "no." After all, who wouldn't want permission to stay in bed for an extra hour, especially on those awful mornings when it's freezing cold, pouring rain, or just sort of dark and depressing?

The answer isn't so clear cut, though. Quality sleep and regular exercise (along with eating right) both help keep your body functioning at its best. In fact, they feed off of each other, meaning that regularly skimping on one in favor of the other isn't the best idea.

So what's a sleep-deprived fitness fanatic to do, then? Read on to find out.

Sweating and snoozing go hand in hand.

At some point, we've all tried to get up early for a workout, only to find ourselves yawning and feeling exhausted.

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At some point, we've all tried to power through a workout after a late night. Whether or not we ended up making it all the way through the sweat session, though, is another story.

Research shows that getting less than seven hours of sleep could lead you to shorten your workouts ... if you can even get yourself moving at all. Unsurprisingly, running low on sleep can make you less motivated to lace up your sneakers, and makes you perceive higher exertion and fatigue.

But doesn't that mean that sleeping is more important than exercising? Not exactly. Because once you start skipping your workouts, your slumber is more likely to suffer. At this point, it's a known fact that exercising regularly during the day will help you sleep more soundly at night.

But what if you need to make a trade-off?

The reason experts recommend that adults get 7-9 hours of sleep every night is because there's no one-size-fits-all amount that's right for everyone. So if you aren't sleeping the standard eight hours but still feel rested and energized, there's likely no reason to skip your workout in favor of more snooze time.

Many of us occasionally wake up feeling groggy and on the fence about what to do, though. If you're only a little more tired than usual, it's probably a good idea to just suck it up and work out. An occasional night of bad sleep won't kill you, and getting a good workout can mean better sleep that night. But since it's so easy to get into the habit of hitting the snooze button instead of exercising, it's better to save the sleeping-in card for extreme scenarios only. (More on that below.)

When you don't quite feel at your peak, think about moving your sweat session outside. Exposure to bright morning light suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin, so you feel more energized. Plus, it has the added bonus of regulating your body's natural sleep-wake cycle, so you sleep more soundly in the evening.

The exception to the rule.

It's a good idea to still exercise on mornings when you're slightly tired (or afternoons if that's your pick). But in cases where you're seriously zonked, it's probably better to let yourself doze. Chances are you'd slack off on your workout anyway, and you'll end up feeling weaker, crabbier and even more spaced out than before. Snooze it off and get back to the gym once you've got some rest under your belt.

So what's the solution?

Even though it's OK to occasionally exercise when you're a little tired or skip exercise for sleep when you're really fried, it's not a great idea to make a habit of either. Instead, take a look at your habits and schedule to figure out where you can make some healthy changes. Groggy mornings could be a sign that you need start moving towards an earlier bedtime.

Or, if a crazy schedule means that you don't have time to get in enough sleep and a workout, consider shorter, more intense exercise sessions. Experts agree that 20- or 30-minute interval workouts are just as effective (if not more so) than their longer, slower-paced counterparts.

Still, remember that if you're dealing with a temporary situation that makes adequate sleep pretty much impossible (finals week and new babies, we're looking at you), you should cut yourself a break.

If you're able to squeeze in a nap and a short workout a few days a week, great. But if you're doing your best just to get a few hours of sleep most nights, don't sweat it too much. When you're able to get back to a more regular schedule, your sneakers will still be there waiting for you.

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