

### Sleep and your health

Staying healthy involves a healthy lifestyle – a balanced diet, regular exercise and plenty of sleep – but maintaining a healthy lifestyle can be hard when we're juggling a demanding career, family responsibilities and social commitments. Of the three healthy lifestyle components, getting enough quality sleep can be the most challenging, especially if you are working abroad on a short-term assignment. The stresses of a new job and new colleagues, a different culture and language, an often difficult climate, a series of unfamiliar surroundings, a tough time helping your family adapt to a new country and a sense of homesickness or anxiety can make sleep elusive. However, a lack of restorative sleep can have a detrimental effect on every aspect of your life, including your physical and mental health, job performance and relationships.

#### The effects of poor sleep

While you're sleeping, your body is processing toxins, releasing important hormones and generally repairing and rejuvenating itself. Insufficient sleep interferes with these functions and, over time, can increase your risk of serious health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, or some cancers. A lack of sleep also has a negative impact on your immune system, making you more susceptible to colds, flu and other infectious illnesses. Many recent studies have shown that poor sleep tends to disrupt hormones that control hunger and appetite, leading to obesity – which has its own health risks. Your body is not the only thing to suffer; insufficient sleep can also lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

When on an international assignment, you need to be performing at peak capacity. Fatigue may slow down your thought processes, make it difficult to concentrate and impair your judgment and memory. Moreover, feeling tired and cranky all the time will not help you cope with new relationships, new ways of working and often challenging cultural differences.

#### Top tips for a good night's sleep

How can you ensure you are getting enough quality sleep when everything around you is so different from home? Here are some tips to consider:

- **Keep your bedroom dark.** If the room is still too light, even with the blinds drawn, use an eye mask or install blackout curtains.
- **Avoid electronics and bright screens as much as possible.** Don't watch TV, play video games, read, or check your smartphone for emails and texts because these activities stimulate the brain. Train your brain to associate bed with just two activities: sleep and intimacy.
- **Adjust the temperature.** If possible, keep the temperature between 18°C/60°F and 23°C/75°F. A bedroom that is too hot or too cold may disturb your sleep.
- **Invest in a good mattress and pillows.** A comfortable bed is worth the expense.
- **Establish a routine.** Go to bed and get up at around the same time every day, including weekends. Even when working in a hot country where people beat the heat by taking siestas during the afternoons and then working into the evenings, do the same, but keep your sleep schedule consistent.

- **Do not eat a heavy meal or greasy, spicy or sugary foods just before bedtime.** Some cultures prefer to eat their evening meal later but if you have trouble sleeping, you may have to stick to early dinners and, if needed, a light, bland snack before retiring.
- **Manage your stress in a healthy way.** Taking your problems to bed with you is a recipe for insomnia. Instead, try mediating, deep breathing, yoga, or Tai Chi.
- **Create a bedtime ritual that tells your mind when it is time to sleep.** Make it enjoyable – taking a bath, meditating, listening to soft music, or reading a few pages of a book. It is also a good idea to reduce the amount of light in your home as bedtime nears.
- **Avoid caffeine** (e.g. coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate) six to eight hours before going to bed. Caffeine is a stimulant and stays in the body for hours.
- **Avoid nicotine** (e.g. cigarettes, tobacco products) as it is also a stimulant and used too close to bedtime, can lead to poor sleep. When smokers go to sleep, they experience withdrawal symptoms that can further disrupt their sleep.
- **Do not drink alcohol close to bedtime.** Although many people think of alcohol as a sedative and indulge in a “nightcap”, it actually disrupts sleep.

For more information on sleep and integrating this important component into a healthy lifestyle, both at home and abroad, contact your Employee Assistance Program.

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If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP. Contact details can be found on your EAP brochure or you can call your local operator and request to place a collect call to Canada at 905-886-3605. You will be put in touch with our Care Access Centre who will arrange for help closer to home.