



# The Restorative Power of Sleep

by Peeka Trenkle

Throughout the course of history, sleep has always been revered as an important part of a healthy lifestyle. The body's need for sleep has not changed over the years but our social and cultural habits and attitudes regarding sleep have changed. In the 19th century, the average person slept about eleven hours per night. In 2007, the average person slept 6-7 hours per night. This great reduction in sleep coincides with many environmental and social changes, including the advent of electric lighting, fast travel, television, telephone, computers, email.... in short, much more constant, daily stimulation of the nervous system.

Natural sleep rhythms are governed by the circadian cycles of day and night, the alternations of light and dark. When we live in natural environments, our bodies respond to the light and dark cycles by secreting proper amounts of hormones – particularly melatonin – which allow our nervous systems to engage and relax according to the rhythms of the day. Most of us live in areas where there is not complete darkness at night, where noise interrupts our quiet evenings in one way or another.

When the body lacks sleep it, produces greater levels of stress hormones which can cause more susceptibility to infection, more need for energy from food, possibly leading to increased weight, and possibly an increase in blood pressure and risk of diabetes.

Adequate sleep allows the body to replenish and repair various systems, functions, tissues and fluids (neurotransmitters and hormones) – and, through dreams, allows healing of the psyche as well. Sleep is restorative and necessary for wellbeing.

Most recommendations for sleep requirements suggest eight hours as the optimal length of nighttime sleep. But the need for sleep is better assessed according to a person's individual constitution. For instance, a very nervous-centered person, one who might be easily stressed and prone to anxiety, might have a greater need for long, restful sleep, while a person who is more prone to lethargy and depression might do well to wake before dawn for a vigorous run, curtailing the desire to sleep too long.

Sleep also naturally fluctuates according to the seasons. Now, in the winter months, we are in a time of darkness, of rest, a time when seeds lie deep in the earth waiting to germinate in the spring. Undoubtedly, our ancestors slept longer in the winter months, using this dark time of the year to rejuvenate and restore – to dream and to heal.

Regular sleep is necessary for good health. Although we live in a time and a culture which values productivity above rest, we should remember that living in right rhythm with the natural world has always proven effective for long term health.

Peeka Trenkle is an herbalist and homeopathic consultant with a private practice in NYC and Denville, NJ. She is a long time advocate for natural health and healing and has been in practice for over 25 years. She is a professional member of the American Herbalists Guild and is a graduate of The School of Homeopathy, NY.

## If you have trouble sleeping:

Take time this winter to make sleep and rest a priority.

Unwind at night with relaxing activities like meditation, bathing, deep breathing.

Avoid television and computers for at least an hour before bed.

Keep your bedroom for sleeping; create a restful environment.

Leave a few hours between eating and sleeping so that you are not digesting while you sleep.

Remember that caffeine, even in the beginning of the day, can affect your sleep patterns. If you are experiencing sleep problems, eliminate coffee and black tea.

Use nervine relaxant herbs such as chamomile, linden, passionflower or skullcap an hour before bed.

Schedule time for sleep. If you have trouble sleeping, allow yourself time to re-learn your sleeping habits. Schedule a weekend that is devoted to relaxing activities and sleep.