



"You can sleep when you're dead." It's a phrase you likely grew up hearing or you might have even said yourself – but these days it's a saying that should sound alarm bells. Why? Because in the past five or so years, the world has finally woken up to the power of a good night's rest.

"When we haven't had restorative sleep, our brain is unable to perform at an optimal level," says Dr David Burton, CEO of medical device company Compumedica, one of the many organisations in the business of sleep health. "Our physical, mental and emotional health is compromised as our brain, muscles, nerves, neurons and complex internal systems are slow to respond and unable to function or perform well."

The problems don't end there. When we don't get enough sleep, we can't form and consolidate memories from the day. We're four times more likely to catch a cold. And should poor sleep persist long-term, we're at higher risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, dementia and even some cancers.

"The thing with sleep is that it's insidious," says Catherine Delamare, General Manager of RealMed in Australia and New Zealand. "If you haven't been getting good sleep for many years, you don't actually realise how exhausted you are. You forget what it feels like to be at your best."

In fact, sleep has become such an issue that in April 2019 the government called for it to be made a national priority. A commissioned report was

prefaced with "New research suggests that sleep is vital in allowing each cell, in every organ of the body, to continue to function. No wonder sleep deprivation is such a highly effective form of torture."

The inquiry found that four in 10 Aussies aren't getting enough of sleep, and that consequently their sleep exhaustion is costing the country a staggering \$26.2 billion a year in financial costs and \$40.1 billion in loss of wellbeing.

The big question is, what can we do to ensure we're catching more ZZZs?

Interestingly, there are individual differences in the amount of sleep people need, depending on genetics, gender and age, says Dr Elise R. Facer-Childs, Research Industry Fellow at Monash University. Adolescents going through puberty, for instance, usually require more sleep than adults.

Across the board, however, studies show that consistently getting less than seven hours of sleep a night can show a significant decline in mental and physical health. A good rule of thumb is if you feel like you're not getting enough shut-eye and it's affecting you throughout the day, you likely need more.

But for many, pencilling in more time for sleep is only half the battle. You can be in bed at a reasonable hour and ready to snooze for at least seven hours... but then comes the hurdle of actually dropping off.

A 2018 sleep survey by health tech company Philips found worrying to be the most common reason Australian adults were kept up in the past

three months at 51 per cent, followed by illness/physical discomfort (27 per cent) and technology distractions (21 per cent).

Fortunately, a few small changes to your routine can go a long way – not only in getting you off to dreamland – but ensuring you stay there.

Creating a bedtime routine that includes at least 30 minutes of screen-free time before sleep is an easy place to start. Next comes concentrating on the other two pillars of health: exercise and nutrition, as well as mental health. It's worth noting that while bed sleep can often cop the blame for tiredness, the problem could also be the result of neglecting these other areas of wellbeing.

Avoiding stimulants such as alcohol and coffee, both of which can delay you getting to the crucial rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep, can also ensure you better quality sleep.

To stay asleep, you'll want to minimise disruptions like light and noise by darkening your bedroom, keeping it at a comfortable temperature and silencing your phone.

If all that fails? It could be that there's a bigger issue at hand – there are currently more than 96 different diagnosable sleep disorders.

They include upper airway resistance syndrome (UARS), caused by a slowing or blockage of air in the nasal passages during sleep; periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD), a cramping or jerking of the legs during sleep; and restless leg syndrome

(RLS), also called Willis-Ekbom disease, which causes uncomfortable sensations in the legs and an irresistible urge to move them.

Two of the most common disorders, however, are insomnia and obstructive sleep apnoea. It's said around one third of Australians will experience insomnia at some point in their lives and that women and elderly people are more likely to suffer from it.

Last year, a study in *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* estimated the number of Australians suffering from sleep apnoea to be around 3 million. Other research has estimated up to 80 per cent of those suffering from it have not yet been diagnosed or are not receiving treatment.

Needless to say, the business of sleeping aids is booming. From technology that measures the quality of REM sleep to headbands that play soothing music and magnesium mixes to spray under the tongue, endless products have been designed to help you snooze better.

A 2017 figure found sleeping aids generated \$69.5 billion in revenue worldwide. In 2023, the industry is predicted to rake in \$101.9 billion.

The boom can be attributed to the newfound awareness of sleep, says Dr Facer-Childs. "Given we're supposed to spend a third of our lives asleep, it's crazy it hasn't been given the level of importance it deserves. There's so much talk about diet and exercise, yet not much about this key pillar of health: sleep. But that's all now changing." It



FIVE SLEEP PRODUCTS TO TRY

1. **Dream Sleep Better Pillow Spray, Angel Aromatics, \$19.95**
2. **Key for Me, iOS app, free**
3. **NIGHT Pillow, Discover Night, from \$217**
4. **SleepPhones Wireless, SleepPhones, from \$148**
5. **Magnesium Oral Spray with Peppermint, The Good Night Co, \$50**