



The Power of Sleep: Tips From Your USPHS Sleep Wellness Champions

Introduction: Why Sleep Matters

Sleep is not a luxury. It is a mission-critical health priority. Good sleep supports physical health, cognitive performance, and decision-making capabilities. As USPHS officers, we depend on adequate rest for optimal productivity and to maintain resilience.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends 7–9 hours of sleep and the NIH cites the importance in the quality of sleep an individual gets as equally, if not more valuable, than the quantity.

The Science behind Sleep: What We Should All Know

Sleep supports many aspects of our wellness that we depend on to maintain our health and resilience.

- Physical health: Quality sleep strengthens the immune system, aids tissue repair, and regulates hormones.
- Mental health: Adequate, quality rest supports memory consolidation, problem-solving, and emotional regulation.
- Chronic disease prevention: Consistent, good-quality sleep lowers the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity.
- Readiness: Lack of sleep impairs reaction time, decision-making, and increases the risk of accidents.

Sleep is essential not only for physical health and operational readiness but also for how we connect with others. When we are sleep-deprived, our ability to recognize faces, interpret emotions, and respond appropriately is compromised. Instead of clearly reading a neutral expression, we may perceive it as negative. This can increase misunderstandings, strain communication, and affect teamwork. Protecting your sleep helps protect your relationships, your judgment, and your mission effectiveness.

How We Can Influence Our Sleep: Core Sleep Hygiene Practices

1. Keep a Consistent Sleep Schedule

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends.
- Avoid “social jet lag” by keeping your schedule steady.

2. Optimize Your Sleep Environment

- Temperature: Keep your room cool (ideally 68°F).
- Darkness: Use blackout curtains or an eye mask.
- Noise: Reduce disruptions or use white noise.
- Comfort: Invest in a quality mattress and supportive pillows.

3. Build Healthy Sleep Habits

Do:

- ✓ Exercise regularly, but not within a few hours of bedtime.
- ✓ Get natural sunlight exposure during the day to support your circadian rhythm.
- ✓ Create a relaxing bedtime routine (stretching, reading, breathing exercises).
- ✓ Limit daytime naps to 20–30 minutes.



Avoid:

- X Caffeine within six hours of bedtime.
- X Heavy meals or alcohol close to bedtime.
- X Screen use (phones, laptops, TV) within one hour of bed.

Tactical Napping for Service Members

On deployment or during high operational demands, a full night's sleep is not always possible. Research from the Department of Defense's Sleep Research Center highlights the value of tactical napping:

- Aim for short naps to “bank” rest toward the recommended seven hours per 24 hours.
- Best done in a dark, quiet, and comfortable space, but realistically, anywhere safe is better than no nap.
- Even short naps can boost alertness, reaction time, and cognitive performance.

Sleep, Heart, and Brain Health

According to the American Heart Association, sleep is directly linked to cardiovascular and brain health. Poor sleep or untreated sleep disorders are associated with increased risk of:

- Hypertension
- Heart disease and stroke
- Cognitive decline and memory issues

Protecting your sleep is protecting your long-term health.

Technology and Sleep

- Digital Wellness: Turn off electronics at least 30–60 minutes before bedtime. Consider a “digital sunset.”
- Blue Light Impact: Use night mode or blue light filters after sunset.
- Sleep Tracking: Helpful for awareness, but don't obsess over data. Focus on how you feel during the day.

When to Seek Help

Seek professional support if you experience:

- Persistent difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Loud snoring or breathing pauses during sleep
- Restless legs or unusual limb movements at night
- Excessive daytime sleepiness despite getting adequate hours

Resources include your primary care provider, a sleep medicine specialist, or a mental health professional if stress or anxiety are affecting rest.

Putting It Into Practice

1. Track your sleep habits for 1–2 weeks with a sleep diary.
2. Identify challenges (e.g., caffeine too late, inconsistent schedule).
3. Choose 1–2 small changes to start with.
4. Stay consistent for at least 2–4 weeks.
5. Monitor your progress—better rest usually means more energy, sharper thinking, and improved mood.



Key Takeaways

- Consistency is key. Sleep at the same times every day.
- Environment matters. Cool, dark, quiet, and comfortable sleep spaces support quality rest.
- Tactical naps count. Short naps help maintain readiness when full sleep isn't possible.
- Protect your heart and brain. Sleep is essential for long-term health.
- Help is available. Seek care if poor sleep persists.

Your Sleep = Your Health + Your Readiness

Sources

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