

Ten Ways to Improve Your Sleeping Habits

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Human beings need to sleep well. It is not a luxury; it is a need. Competitive tennis players need to get the most out of these hours of unconscious evasion in order to recover and be ready and alert during matches, practice, and daily life. This means that they need to provide their bodies, which are required to perform at their maximum most of the time, necessary rest.

Sleep renews and prepares the mind and the body of the player to provide for optimal performance. Research has shown that sleeping is not an inactive state but rather a very active one. When the individual is sleeping there are several changes in the brain waves, eye movements, muscular activity, body temperature, breathing and cardiac rhythm, and even genital stimulation. Furthermore, during sleep the brain regulates the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal and immune functions.

Sleeping also helps the storage, re-organisation and access of information, and consolidates remembrances by favouring the activity of memory. In fact, the “sleeping brain” is often more active than the “awoken” one.

Although some players may suffer from a lack of sleep, few would be aware of how this can impair their performance both on and off court. For example, a lack of sleep can have significant consequences on the function of bodily organs (heart, liver and bladder malfunction), mood states (irritability, lack of sensory alertness and motor capacity, problems of concentration and reaction capacity), tiredness and exhaustion, etc.

The purpose of this article is to present several ways to improve your sleeping habits in order to have a healthier life and better tennis performance.

1. Try to avoid stimulants late at night

If you want to fall asleep quickly and sleep well it is advisable to avoid stimulants such as caffeine (i.e. coffee, tea, coke, chocolate), nicotine, and alcohol. It is also better to avoid high protein or heavy, *fatty* meals that will demand your stomach to work more than usual. Also, the tackling of a difficult and demanding task right before you go to bed is not recommendable, as it will keep your mind spinning in full gear.

2. Relax

Being busy during the day will help you sleep better. However, excess energy accumulated during the day

may create some difficulties in getting to sleep. Practice relaxation techniques before going to bed to reduce stress. Some of the techniques you may use are: listening to relaxing music, follow a muscular relaxation routine (progressive relaxation by tightening and relaxing different muscles), performing breathing exercises (abdominal breathing), using visualisation (trying to visualise something you like), etc. Taking a hot shower or a warm bath, or reading a good book will also help you to relax.

3. Know when you have to lie down to sleep

Sometimes, people lie down to sleep just after a heavy meal, a long match or a very exciting and emotional event. These situations will not help you fall asleep very easily. Try to avoid heavy meals two to four hours before going to bed. However, you should not go to bed on an empty stomach either. A light evening snack may even be helpful. Also, performing some exercise and playing some tennis will help you sleep better if done more than three hours before going to bed. Lie down to sleep only when you really feel sleepy.

4. Know what to do if you don't fall asleep

If you don't fall asleep within 30 minutes after turning out the light, get up and do some relaxation work. Another option is to listen to music with the lights out. Try not to get nervous if you don't sleep. This should not be an obsession. Specialists indicate that in the event of sleeping problems lasting more than three weeks it is advisable to go to the doctor. Ninety percent of cases can be solved. Sleeping pills should generally be avoided, particularly on the eve of a big match because of the risk of a “hang-over effect”. There is no need to worry, when on the day of a big match you did



For tennis players to be able to perform at their best day in, day out, sleep is essential.

not sleep as well and as long as you normally do; Olympic records have been set after sleepless nights!

If you would like to use a sleeping pill, i.e. to combat your jetlag, choose a short-acting one and take it immediately before you go to bed, not after four hours of tossing and turning.

5. Reduce thinking and worrying in bed. Learn to switch off

When you lie in bed try to forget any problems and focus on pleasant thoughts that will help you to fall asleep easily and provide for a peaceful night's sleep. Players *are* busy enough during the day with practice, matches, trips, school, etc. when in bed, it is time to rest, relax and enjoy.

6. Rely on the routine: go to bed and get up at the same time each day

If you go to bed and get up at the same time each day, your “internal clock” will be ready to wake up and go to bed following the routine. This is the best way to give your body and mind the necessary hours they need to rest and be ready for the next day.

7. Know how much you have to sleep

Every age has its general parameters. A newly born may sleep between 13 and 20 hours per day. From one month to one year, the average is 15 hours a day. From one year to adolescence, the average decreases from 14 to 8 hours. During adolescence, youngsters start to have their own sleeping patterns that become personal during adult age. If you wake up recovered, that means that you have slept enough.

8. Choose the correct sleeping position

Try to avoid sleeping on your stomach. This is not only bad for your back, but your neck too. Try sleeping on your side with your knees bent upward and a pillow between them.

9. Prepare your room for a nice sleep

Value your sleep! You will sleep better if your room is dark, silent and ventilated. The ideal room temperature is 18° C. If this is difficult to achieve you can always use eye shades and ear plugs, particularly if your partner is prone to

heavy snoring. Certain smells have been proven to induce a deep sense of relaxation, such as a whiff of lavender or the salty air of the sea-shore. Likewise, if you can choose the colour of your room, just remember that blue, green and purple colours evoke serenity and calmness and may help to induce sleep.

10. Use the correct “equipment”

It is important that your pyjamas are comfortable and made of soft fabrics. Clean, fresh linen sheets will also be of help. Linen sheets feel different against the skin and disperse body heat better than other fabrics such as cotton. The covers should be loose, to reduce the risk of cramping. An electric heating blanket may be a good option also, because it helps to relax muscles and increases brain temperature. Use one with a timer, so it will shut off just after you fall asleep. Sleep on a firm mattress to avoid back and neck problems. As per the pillow, choose a soft, low pillow or get a cervical pillow that gives the neck proper support.

So, lights out and *sleep well!*