

How Proper Sleep can Improve Your Training and Racing

By John Ruibal, MS, RD, CSSD, LD

Dear John,

How important is proper sleep to my overall training plan?

There are many components to a good training plan to include, proper nutrition, hydration, quality workouts on the road and track, strength training, flexibility but one we often forget is the right amount of rest and recovery.

The biggest component of rest should be good quality sleep in the right amount. Many of us may feel like we can get by on 5 or 6 hours of sleep a night. When you are trying to perform your best this is well under what is required. Many of the top world class runners get 9- 10 hours of sleep and even work in a nap in between workouts. With a family and job 9 - 10 hours of sleep may only be a dream. So let's take a look at how much sleep you need and how you can improve the quality of the sleep you get.

How much sleep you need is very individual but a rule of thumb for adults is 7 - 9 hours per night. So how do you determine how much you need? Follow this simple test to get your average hours of sleep for you.

1. Pick a day that you do not need to set an alarm to wake up.
2. Record the hours you sleep. Repeat 3 to 4 times and get an average.
3. Then add an additional amount of time for the miles you are training each week. Add 1 minute for every mile you average during the week.

So if you find you need 7 hours of sleep and you are training 40 miles a week, your goal would be to add another 40 minutes of sleep to your daily routine.

Here are some solid tips to help you increase the quality and quantity of your sleep.

1. Make sure to practice good sleep hygiene. The environment that you sleep in is as important to getting a good night rest as much as the amount you get. Keep your bedroom free of distractions and make sure the room is dark and cool. That means turn the TV and Computer off before you climb into bed.
2. Make sleep time a routine and try to get into bed at the same time each night even on weekends.
3. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, spicy foods and heavy meals 4 hours prior to bed.
4. Track how much sleep you are getting by logging your sleep. Technology like a FITBIT or other wrist band activity tracker work well. If you are old school like me a simple sleep diary will work. The national sleep foundation has a great sleep diary to track your sleep and can be downloaded free at:
<http://sleepfoundation.org/sleep-diary/SleepDiaryv6.pdf>

Take a look at this information you record. Look for patterns you can change, then try to make some small changes. Make 1 or two until they become habit and then work on the next area that you can improve on. Remember that we are looking for lifestyle changes and these take time to develop.

Increasing sleep is especially important when as you get closer to that goal race you have been training so hard for. When you start your taper really concentrate on getting adequate sleep. This will get you refreshed and focused for your race. Sleep is an important component of your overall training plan and should not be overlooked. So turn off that television and work on getting a good night's rest for better workouts and races.