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[Wellness](#)

Nap time is the new coffee break. Here's how to make the most of it.



(Simon Pemberton for The Washington Post)

By Galadriel Watson

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There are many habits I've gained while working from home: snacking when desired, taking the dog for a midmorning walk, talking to myself and settling in for a daily nap. That last one will be

especially painful to give up if or when I return to an office; my naps have become essential afternoon pick-me-ups. Why do my naps feel so needed and so revitalizing? And will I have to live without? I spoke to experts to get their advice.

The desire to nap

There are two biological processes that contribute to daily drowsiness, says Sara Mednick, a professor of cognitive science at the University of California at Irvine and author of "[Take a Nap! Change Your Life.](#)"

The first system is the circadian: It prompts you to stay awake when it's light out and asleep when it's dark. In the middle of the day, it causes the hormone cortisol to start decreasing from its morning high and your core body temperature to slightly dip; losing heat helps you fall and stay asleep. The second is the homeostatic: It makes you sleepier the longer you've been awake. As the day progresses, it continually increases your "sleep pressure," causing you to have a growing need for sleep. Together, at midday, these create "kind of a perfect storm that makes people tired," Mednick says.

However, not all people are equally affected by these processes. "Some people really experience it, and some people don't," she says. And, of course, not everyone can or does give into it. A [2009 survey](#) by the Pew Research Center found that, on a typical day, one-third of U.S. adults nap.

Needing a nap is "a reflection that you haven't gotten sufficient sleep at night to address your body's need for sleep," says Lawrence Epstein, past president of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and clinical director for sleep medicine at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital. And chronically missing out on sleep is nothing but trouble. "It affects performance, concentration, mood," Epstein says. It also "affects physiological processes involved in maintaining good health," he adds, noting links to obesity, hypertension and heart disease.

Pros and cons of naps

For many people who are sleep-deprived, a short shut-eye session is the ticket, Mednick says. "Your mood gets better, your creativity, your perceptual processing, your memory processing."

The benefits of napping show up in study after study. Mednick has found that nappers perform as well on a [pattern-recognition task](#) as people who have slept overnight. She has found that naps enhance [creative problem-solving](#). Naps can [boost and restore brain power](#). Toddlers who nap [express more joy](#). Adults nappers can tolerate [frustration](#) longer and feel less impulsive. Naps may help protect older people from [cognitive decline and dementia](#). Runners can use naps to improve [endurance](#). People who nap once or twice a week have a lower risk of [cardiovascular disease](#). [Memory](#) is better after a nap. And on it goes.

On the other hand, many people can't tolerate naps and feel groggy when they wake up. This may be because they go into heavy, slow-wave sleep, which is the deepest stage of sleep, making it difficult to return to the waking world. Naps can also disrupt that night's sleep. "Naps tend to

be kind of a double-edged sword,” Epstein says. “If you’re sleeping during the daytime, you’re going to sleep less at night.”

Daytime sleepiness can also be a symptom of an underlying condition or sleeping disorder. If you’re often napping or feeling sleepy during the day, try to extend your sleep at night. If that doesn’t help, “you should probably be checking with your doctor or a sleep specialist,” Epstein says.

The pandemic's effect on sleep

Epstein has found that pandemic sleep habits have veered in two directions — better and worse — which have had an effect on naps. Many people’s sleep habits have gone awry. They may be suffering from [greater insomnia](#) and [poorer sleep](#). [Additional time in bed](#) doesn’t equal quality time. Stress, illness, [nightmares](#) or a need to finish work set aside while caring for children have interrupted nightly rest, which means those people are more likely to need to nap. Others, [freed from their alarm clocks](#), “are now getting more sleep and feeling more rested,” Epstein says. They, therefore, don’t need to nap.

Mednick says she has heard from many people who have taken up daytime snoozing. “There are definitely a lot of people who are at home and think, ‘Oh, finally. I can work out when I want, I can nap when I want, I can wear what I want,’ ” she says. “There are a lot of self-care choices that people suddenly have.”

Julia Hobsbawm, a British entrepreneur and writer who focuses on social health, isn’t surprised that at-home workers might be napping more. “Our lives, even in lockdown, tend to be full of stuff to do and endless digital distraction,” the author of “[The Simplicity Principle](#)” says by email. “Our brains start to behave like a computer which has been switched on for days on end: It gets worn out faster.” As more people work from home and can regulate their days themselves, she says, “I would see it as entirely positive if people begin to build in naps or a daily reset.”

How to nap effectively

If you’re in the napping camp, Mednick suggests setting an alarm for about 20 minutes, long enough to enable you to enter [Stage 2 sleep](#). She considers this period of light sleep, in which your heartbeat and breathing slow and your muscles relax, “the reset button of sleep.” In a [NASA study](#) that found that naps helped pilots become more alert, 10 to 20 minutes was good. Experiment to see what refreshes you without making you groggy or ruining your bedtime.

Make yourself comfortable. Lie down if possible; one [study](#) found that rest in a bed had more benefits than rest in a seat. Use an eye mask and ear plugs if needed. Try to set aside your worries, perhaps by first engaging in a few minutes of mindful meditation. Breathe slowly and deeply. Concentrate on relaxing your muscles.

After your nap, if you need help becoming alert, splash your face with water or step into bright light. A caffeinated beverage might help — but not too late in the day, because it could adversely affect your overnight sleep.

If you've become a napper while working at home and are worried that you won't be able to nap when you return to your office, "this is a great time to find out how much time you need to feel fully rested," Epstein says. ([Current recommendations](#) are seven to nine hours a night for healthy adults.) Play with your schedule to see how many hours you need. Then, when you return to the office, make sure you go to bed early enough to get in those hours. "You do that," Epstein says, "and hopefully, you won't need a nap."

Back at the office?

A work environment shouldn't stop you from catching 40 winks if you want, though, Mednick says. "People can still find ways to nap, and they always have." They might sit in their car, book an empty conference room or lean their head on their hand to look as if they're in deep thought.

Another option is to encourage your employer to set up a napping space. "It's actually in their best interest to find ways to create a better-rested workforce," Epstein says, adding that sleep problems increase rates of absenteeism and work-related accidents and decrease work productivity. "Unfortunately, that's not the corporate mind-set."

Hobsbawm thinks this should change. "The idea that we can work as automatons, always on and permanently connected to our devices, is as unhelpful as it is outdated," she says. "Everyone needs a moment, several times a day, to reset their thoughts and do as little as possible. If you can nap, then great, but if you can't, the main thing is to switch out of what you've been doing." Alternatives could be a physical activity, such as a walk, or an artistic activity, such as coloring. "A reset is like a battery charge," Hobsbawm says. "It can be short, but it has sweet benefits."

Mednick, a proud napper herself, hopes companies will allow employees to continue to work from and nap at home after the pandemic. "Napping is not what lazy people do," she says. "It's what people who are really effective and creative and self-regulating and conscientious do. Those are the type of people who nap."

Watson is a writer and comics artist and author of children's books such as "[Running Wild](#)."