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Posture important in sleep

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During the workday, Americans labor in various careers. However, at night many of us transition into sheepherding - corralling and counting the sheep jumping mental fences during another restless night.

That's because 75 percent of Americans regularly experience sleep woes, such as frequent waking during the night, according to the National Sleep Foundation's 2005 Sleep in America Poll.

Some health care practitioners say the secret to claiming 40 winks hinges on posture.

"The goal is to place the spine and its curves in as close to a natural position as possible to afford a structurally stress-free period of rest," says Michael Wiles, of the chiropractic program at Northwestern Health Sciences University in Bloomington, Minn. "Proper posture or at least an attempt to position yourself in a pain-free, stress-free posture is very important whether or not you suffer from back problems."

Though some debate the notion that one can "choose" a sleep posture, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, a British trade association, recently published a guide on sleep posture.

Sound sleep is necessary to recharge the body physically and mentally, says Robert W. Fayle, a Texas neurologist. "Sleep debt may cause changes in immune responses which make (one) more susceptible to illness," adds Fayle, medical director of the Sleep Center at Houston's Park Plaza Hospital.

If you're not sleeping well, and medical and chemical causes (late-night caffeine binges, for instance) have been ruled out, your sleep posture could be the culprit.

"Sometimes poor habits are the cause of a poor night's sleep. Other times, it is because people sleep in a posture that puts a strain on their bodies," Wiles says.

The physiotherapist's guide says people adopt one of four sleeping positions, or postures: lying on the right side, left side, back or stomach.

Stomach-sleepers may endure the most strain, says Jason Marchetti, a physician with the Texas Back Institute in Plano, Texas, because "theoretically, we believe that stomach lying may increase back pain" by exerting pressure on certain joints in the back of the spine.

The optimal sleep posture in which to baby your body is "essentially the fetal position, on your side with your knees drawn up," Wiles says.

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