

Looking for the Secret to Staying Young?

Turn back the hands of time and stay fresh with a simple, daily nap.

by Erin Wiley

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Photo courtesy of Erin Wiley

People often tell me I look younger than I actually am, and I appreciate that. Being in my 40s, I'll take any compliment tossed my way. But when people ask what my secret is, I tell them that I do have one super-powerful weapon that I use to turn back the hands of time. A tool that can make a body look, feel and function as if it's 20 years younger (unless you happen to actually be only 20 ... in which case you probably

don't need this tip quite yet). So, my top tip for looking and feeling your very best? Napping. Yep: night-night, shut-eye, 40 winks, resting your eyelids, siesta, sleepy time ... whatever you want to call it, napping has near-magical powers of rejuvenation.

I enjoy napping so much that I have it perfected down to a science (at least that what my husband tells me!). Why, even before sleep researchers were informing us on the mechanics of sleep cycles, I knew from my own personal "research" that I had to keep my nap time at just 20-25 minutes in order to feel truly alert and rested afterward. Now I'll admit that 20 minutes for a nap seems almost pointless — it's so brief — but let's face it: who has time for a two-hour siesta? So let's discuss the "how's" and "why's" of the 20-minute power nap.

Why nap?

According to the National Sleep Foundation a 20-minute nap will boost your alertness and ability to perform motor skills. It is excellent for restoring your ability to focus, improving memory and cognitive function, increasing creativity and productivity, boosting intelligence and contributing to a longer, more healthful life. Napping can reduce stress, help you maintain a healthy weight and may even reduce your risk of heart disease. Also, it's worth noting that the majority of American adults today are chronically sleep-deprived, and would stand to benefit from any extra time spent sleeping. And, of course, it helps you feel less tired — a huge, if not obvious, benefit to catching a catnap.

Any longer than a 20-minute nap, and one begins to enter a deeper stage of sleep, one that is difficult to wake from unless

fully completed. These deeper sleep cycles vary from approximately 60-90 minutes in length, and we usually experience around five of these each night. Staying under the 20-30 minutes threshold of sleep will allow your brain to rejuvenate, but not enter the deeper sleep in which dreaming takes place. Often, after a 20 minute nap, one will feel as if they never really even fell asleep, but that's the type of nap that will mean a more rested, alert and productive you.

How to Nap. Here are a few tips that can make napping easier, and more productive:

Location: Obviously if you have your own office, you can shut and lock the door, or if you work from home you can sleep in your own bed ... but what about the rest of us? I say, "Where there's a will, there's a way!" As a teacher, years ago, I would make up a little "bed" and sleep on the floor of my classroom underneath my desk. I have friends who go out to their car for their lunch break and set an alarm for 20 minutes and catnap in the car. Certainly not every job will be conducive to afternoon napping, but if it's important enough to you to try and make it happen, it may be worth discussing with your boss. The promise of a more efficient, energized, enthusiastic employee might be enough to sway your boss to accommodate your request.

Time: Researchers have discovered that the ideal naptime is between the hours of 1 and 3 p.m., but that is based on someone who rises at approximately 7 a.m. Adjust accordingly if you work a swing shift. Ideally one's nap would take place somewhere between 6 and 8 hours after rising, often after a snack or meal.

Setting: If you can use some sort of white noise (like a fan) to block out distracting auditory stimuli it will be helpful. Closing blinds or even using an eye mask can help block out light. Keeping the room cool, and maybe grabbing a blanket or light sweater to cover you can make you more comfortable while you rest. Quietening the room, making it dark and keeping it cool are all signals to your body to go to sleep.

For me, napping is the difference between stumbling through the afternoon like a zombie, and completing my workday with energy that lasts until quitting time (often well past 5 p.m.). It's the difference between shuffling through the evening routine with spouse and kids, and actually having the energy to enjoy my family, to get something accomplished and enjoy it. Maybe it will work for you, too ... try and figure out how you can sneak in a nap or two sometime in the next few weeks, and see if it works for you. Happy napping!

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