

# An Ayurvedic Guide to Balanced Sleep

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Do you suffer from irregular sleep? Perhaps it's falling asleep that troubles you. Maybe you wake up in the middle of the night, wanting desperately to keep sleeping without any luck. Or is your tendency to spend more time sleeping than is physiologically necessary, so that you get *too much* sleep (which can be equally problematic)?

The truth is that imbalances in our sleep patterns can be very discouraging—even debilitating—and the task of getting back on track can feel incredibly daunting. But with the right set of tools, it is possible to find and return to balance. Being the timeless art of living that it is, Ayurveda offers a refreshingly simple and practical approach to balancing sleep cycles. This article will help to point you in the direction of a number of useful Ayurvedic tools for returning to balance.



# What Science Says

We spend roughly a third of our lives asleep, and while scientists have been studying the functions of sleep extensively for years, some of our most basic questions about why we sleep have been difficult to answer.<sup>1</sup> What is clear is that balanced sleep is a staple of optimal health.<sup>2</sup> Sleep is a natural time for the body and mind to rest, reset, detoxify, and rejuvenate—and sleep is carefully regulated by our bodies.

In terms of our overall health, sleep is actually on par with eating; it is essential to both physiological and cognitive functioning.<sup>3</sup> And in much the same way that hunger serves as a safeguard against undernourishment, sleepiness acts as a protective mechanism against inadequate rest.<sup>4</sup>

But sometimes life interferes with our internal biological rhythms and they become slightly out of whack, which can result in either too much sleep or too little.

## The Functions of Sleep

Farmers everywhere know that a field is far more productive when it is allowed to periodically lie fallow to regenerate the fertility of the soil. Sleep provides a similar period of rest for the body and mind—but we don't fully understand it.

One of the most confounding aspects of sleep for scientists has been the fact that, in nature, sleep is a risky business, with a very real potential to leave animals vulnerable to injury, predation, and death.<sup>5</sup> So why do most animals (humans included) need to sleep in order to survive? Sleep itself must offer something that cannot be obtained thru conscious or semi-conscious *rest*.

Actually, we do know that a balanced sleep cycle plays a very important role in our health and well-being on a number of levels. Some of the benefits of sleep may be fairly ethereal in nature, and therefore difficult to assess. But it is noteworthy that indigenous cultures around the world have long valued the altered states of consciousness that occur during sleep as an important means of receiving information, healing, and guidance from the unseen world.

In fact, many traditions view dreams as the language of the soul. Even modern science has affirmed our capacity to release stress, anxiousness, and unresolved emotions through our dreams.<sup>6</sup> There is also increasing evidence in the field of psychology that sleep plays a critical role in supporting the emotional centers of the brain—as well as overall emotional and behavioral health.<sup>7</sup> In the yogic tradition, sleep shares many similarities with *Samadhi*—a highly revered meditative state beyond the reach of the rational mind.<sup>8</sup> Though in sleep, we are generally in the realm of the unconscious mind, whereas *Samadhi* is achieved through conscious awareness.<sup>9</sup>

Other functions of sleep are more concrete and can be easily measured by modern science. As we have all experienced, sleep helps to restore our level of alertness. During wakeful periods, the neuromodulator adenosine slowly accumulates in the brain, causing us to feel more and more tired the longer we are awake. During sleep,



adenosine is actively cleared from the brain, which is why we feel more refreshed and alert after a good night's sleep.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, caffeine blocks the effects of adenosine on the brain so that we remain alert when we might normally feel tired or sleepy.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, sleep has important restorative functions and plays a critical role in the repair and rejuvenation of tissues—both in the brain and elsewhere in the body. Activities like muscle growth, tissue repair, wound healing, protein synthesis, and the release of growth hormones occur mostly, if not entirely, during sleep.<sup>12</sup>

Sleep also promotes the more efficient removal of metabolic wastes, and very directly supports the immune system.<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, studies have shown a total loss of immune function—followed by death—among animals that are completely deprived of sleep.<sup>14</sup> Studies have also linked sleep deprivation with increased cancer growth and a decrease in the immune system's ability to control the growth of cancer cells.<sup>15</sup>

Further, sleep has been linked to important changes in the structure and function of the brain.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to infants and young children, sleep (and a lot of it) is absolutely critical to proper brain development.<sup>17</sup> In adults, similar correlations have been drawn between sleep and the brain's ability to reorganize itself and form new neural pathways.<sup>18</sup>

Sleep also helps to restore the signal strength of important brain synapses, facilitating learning and memory.<sup>19</sup> In other words, our sleep very directly affects our ability to learn, retain information, perform tasks, develop new perspectives, and re-pattern neurological pathways.

For all of these reasons and more, it is actually quite important that we get an appropriate amount of sleep.

## Ayurveda's Perspective on Sleep Disorders

In Ayurveda, sleep disorders are classified according to *dosha*. There are *vata*-, *pitta*-, and *kapha*-type sleep disturbances—each with a distinct character, and a corresponding line of treatment. But the doshas can also have a distinctive influence on our sleep preferences and habits.

As with many things in Ayurveda, one's constitution and current state of balance will influence the types of sleep imbalances that are most likely to crop up. A *vata*-predominant individual is more likely to experience *vata*-type sleep disorders; *pitta*-types will tend toward *pitta* sleep complaints, and *kapha*-types toward *kapha* sleep issues.

But any imbalances overlaying the constitution will also influence the situation. If you do not know your constitution or your current state of balance, please consider taking our simple [dosha quiz](#).

The following sections are meant to help you understand how each of the three doshas informs your experience of sleep. Look for what you identify with—both in terms of your sleep habits and preferences, as well as the types of imbalances that tend to influence your sleep patterns.



## Vata-Type Sleep and Sleep Imbalances

Vata-type sleep tends to be irregular and light but can be profoundly deep when one is exhausted. Vata-types typically crave a soft bed to cushion their protruding bones, and tend to sleep fewer hours than other types.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, vata is better supported with more sleep rather than less. Vata is also behind the tendencies to grind the teeth, sleep walk, or talk in one's sleep.<sup>21</sup> Vata-type dreams tend to be spacious and airy and often focus on movement, adventure, or being chased; vata-types dream a lot, but they frequently have trouble recalling their dreams.<sup>22</sup>

While vata can cause difficulty falling asleep, the classic vata-type sleep imbalance is to awaken during the night—unable to return to sleep. This is particularly common during vata time, from about 2–6 a.m.

If these vata-type patterns resonate with you, please see our resource on [Balancing Insufficient Sleep](#) for recommendations—including specific practices you can use to pacify vata, where appropriate.

## Pitta-Type Sleep and Sleep Imbalances

Pitta-types generally sleep well, though somewhat lightly. They tend to prefer a firm bed and few covers, due to pitta's tendency to overheat.<sup>23</sup> Pittas crave a moderate amount of sleep—somewhere between vata and kapha, which is generally supportive of their physiological needs. However, pitta-types can easily forego sleep when they are preoccupied with a project or are up against a deadline.

Pitta sleep is often disturbed by fiery, vivid, and active dreams, but pitta-types typically return to sleep easily if they are awakened.<sup>24</sup> Difficulty falling asleep is the classic pitta-type sleep disorder because pitta is elevated in the mind and in the atmosphere from about 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. This can activate the mind, stimulate ambition, and can completely overwhelm any desire to sleep. As a result, many pitta-types are night owls and can be incredibly productive at night.

If these pitta-type patterns resonate with you, please see our resource on [Balancing Insufficient Sleep](#) for recommendations.

## Kapha-Type Sleep and Sleep Imbalances

Kapha-types are heavy sleepers, can generally sleep soundly anywhere, and are not easily disturbed or awakened. They adore being in bed and like to sleep more hours than any other type—preferably on a soft mattress, under an abundance of comforting, fluffy covers.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, kapha-types actually need less sleep than vata- and pitta-types. Kapha dreams tend to be calm, smooth, watery, and emotional.<sup>26</sup> When out of balance, kapha tends to cause excessive sleep, a feeling of heaviness, sluggishness, and difficulty waking up.



Kapha is elevated in the mind and in the atmosphere from about 6-10 a.m./p.m., which can increase kapha's natural heaviness and sluggishness, making it easy for kapha-types to sleep for many extra hours.

If these kapha-type patterns sound familiar, please see our resource on [Balancing Excess Sleep](#) for recommendations on how to balance excess kapha in the sleep cycle.

## Finding Balance

While each dosha has a unique influence on sleep patterns and imbalances, quality sleep is equally important for all of us. Ayurveda can help us to discover our natural tendencies and to distinguish those from our particular vulnerabilities toward various sleep imbalances.

In addition, Ayurveda has a great deal to say about how to support balanced sleep in general. Often, simple adjustments to routine, exercise, diet, and lifestyle habits can have a profound impact on sleep.

In fact, in today's world, where sleep disorders abound, modern medicine is embracing many of Ayurveda's lifestyle strategies in the treatment of sleep disorders. Specific herbs can also be used to support a return to balance. An Ayurvedic practitioner can be incredibly helpful in identifying the most potent strategies for your individual situation.

That said, our guides are specifically designed to help you begin to understand and correct your current imbalances. Simply choose whether your tendency is to be deprived of sleep or to get too much of it.

Keep in mind that you do not have to be experiencing disordered sleep now in order to begin to correct the imbalances that underlie your tendencies. Ayurveda is a holistic approach to wellness that can help us to correct the root cause of our imbalances at any time—whether we are currently experiencing symptoms or not.

### **Suffering from insufficient sleep (or is this your tendency)?**

Please see our guide to [Balancing Insufficient Sleep](#).

### **Sleep too much (or is this your tendency)?**

Please see our guide to [Balancing Excess Sleep](#).

We wish you the best as you learn to support your daily rhythms and balance your sleep cycle with the wisdom of Ayurveda.



## References

<sup>1</sup> “Why Do We Sleep, Anyway,” *Healthy Sleep* (Harvard Medical School: Division of Sleep Medicine), last modified 18 Dec, 2007, <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/benefits-of-sleep/why-do-we-sleep>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Neil Osterweil, “The Health Benefits of Dreams: Researchers now believe that dreams help us process emotions, consolidate memories, and more,” *Web MD*, last modified Feb 25, 2009, <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/features/the-health-benefits-of-dreams>.

<sup>7</sup> A.N. Goldstein and M.P. Walker, “The Role of Sleep in Emotional Brain Function,” *Pub Med Abstract*, last updated 31 Jan. 2014, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24499013>.

<sup>8</sup> Swami Shantimurti Saraswati, “Yoga Nidra, Sleep and Brainwave Patterns,” *Ashram Yoga*, retrieved 29 Sep, 2014, <http://ashramyoga.com/swamis-corner/yoga-nidra/yoga-nidra-sleep-and-brainwaves/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “Why Do We Sleep” *Healthy Sleep*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> “Why Do We Sleep” *Healthy Sleep*; “Sleep,” *Wikipedia*, retrieved 15 Jul, 2014, *Functions*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleep#Functions>.

<sup>13</sup> “Sleep,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>14</sup> “Why Do We Sleep” *Healthy Sleep*.

<sup>15</sup> “Sleep,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>16</sup> “Why Do We Sleep” *Healthy Sleep*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “Sleep,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>20</sup> Sebastian Pole, *Ayurvedic Medicine: The Principles of Traditional Practice* (London: Churchill Livingstone, 2006), 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Pole, *Ayurvedic Medicine*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

