

# Some numbers and historical facts about sleep



It seems like nobody's getting much sleep in America these days. In America, some researchers say that 75 percent of the population reports at least one symptom of a sleep disorder.

One-hundred-and-fifty years ago, people still went to sleep when their candles burnt out, and they got up when the sun popped up over the horizon, according to sleep specialist Dr. David Joffe. Now, he says, those cues are no longer part of what signals it's time to sleep in our societies. Instead people go to bed after their favorite television shows go off or they wake when their alarm goes off.

Stanley Coren, author of the book *Sleep Thieves*, claims that our modern sleep-deprived state makes us clumsy, stupid, unhappy and dead. According to Coren, evolution set us up for about nine to 10 hours out of every 24 hours for sleeping. Now however, in the United States, the average amount of sleep during the weekday is 6.9 hours; on the weekend, it's 7.4 hours (National Sleep Foundation, 2005). That means that on average most people are being deprived of between a half an hour and 2 hours of sleep per night.

Coren also says that every spring when we shift to daylight savings time and lose an hour's worth of sleep that traffic accidents (according to statistics in Canada) jump by 7 percent. Every fall when we go back to getting our extra hour's worth of sleep, accidents decline by 7 percent. That's how sensitive we are to needing the right amount of sleep, he says.

If you're not getting enough sleep, you can blame Thomas Edison. He invented the light bulb and, he proclaimed people didn't need much sleep. The prolific inventor claimed to only sleep four hours a night, but according to the U.S. Department of Interior's National Park Service Web site page on Thomas Edison, he actually slept between four and five hours a night and kept a cot in his laboratory where he often took catnaps, which were an hour or two long—and sometimes he would take two a day. If he had a night of short sleep, he usually slept most of the next day as well. So he was probably not as sleep deprived as is commonly believed.

Here are some more sleep numbers from the National Sleep Foundations 2005 "Sleep in America" poll:

- 40 percent of respondents report getting less than seven hours of sleep a night on weekdays.
- 71 percent are getting less than eight hours of sleep on weekdays.
- Since 2001, the percentage of respondents who say they get eight or more hours of sleep on weeknights has plummeted 12 percent (from 38 percent in 2001 to 26 percent in 2005.)
- Also, since 2001 the proportion of respondents who say they sleep eight hours or more on the weekends has gone from 61 percent (2001) to 49 percent (2005).