TO NAP OR NOT TO NAP?
(THAT IS THE QUESTION)

The demands of modern life leave many of us sleep deprived at least some of the time. Either
time in bed at night is forfeited to allow for “higher priority” activities, or stress/worries/illness
undermine sleep quality even when bedtime is sufficient. Does research support that a short
afternoon nap is actually helpful? Yes.

Given that a post-lunch rest can be an appropriate time to nap in the workplace, Takahashi and
Arito[1] examined the effects of a 15 minute nap right after lunch, following a night on which
sleep was restricted to < 4 hours. The nap improved both subjective sleepiness and accuracy of
logical reasoning measured later in the afternoon, although the nap only partly reversed the effect
of the sleep deficit. A measure of alertness (latency of the P300 event-related potential) also
showed improvement after napping.

In an earlier study in non-sleep deprived subjects, the same authors found that a 15 minute nap
was more beneficial than a 45 minute nap. This apparent paradox can be explained by the
observation that the 15 minute nap does not allow for development of deep non-REM sleep, as
sleep inertia (where you wake up groggy) correlates positively with the amount of deep non-
REM sleep. Other studies suggest that short naps produce benefit only after partial (not total)
sleep deprivation.

A good night’s sleep is best, but a short afternoon nap can help compensate for partial sleep loss.

If you would like a copy of this article, contact the Sleep Disorders Center at (714) 771-8950.

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