



A Dentist's Approach to Wellbeing

By Dr. Ron Ehrlich

There are three things we do every day which we give little thought to, yet if we do them well we are almost certainly assured of being really well.

Sleeping Well

Without a doubt, good health starts with a good night's sleep. An avalanche of choices, bombard us each day that we know are not good for our health. We make promises about what we will eat and drink, and the exercise that we will do, but if we are tired it just does not happen.

A consistently good night's sleep is important to every aspect of our health and it can affect:

- Alertness and performance
- Memory, concentration and creativity
- General health
- Your sex-life

In the short-term reduced sleep leads to headaches, colds and digestive problems, but in the long-term it is linked to obesity, heart problems, diabetes and a shorter life span.

The famous Kinsey reports on sexual behaviour observed that the best aphrodisiac was sleeping well, eating well and regular exercise. It is the same with all other aspects of our life.

Let us review what 'a good night's sleep' means. There are two aspects to consider in getting a good night's sleep.

How Much Sleep: 90% of the population needs seven to eight hours a night. If you do not get that much sleep, those hours missed add up and there is a cumulative sleep deficit. The sleep 'budget' needs to be balanced so missed sleep needs to be made up.

Quality sleep, means reaching deeper levels of sleep and keeping the body and brain well oxygenated while you are asleep. If our sleep is disturbed and we do not go into those deeper levels our body and mind suffers for it. It is only when we reach those deeper levels of sleep that the body really starts to effectively rebuild and recuperate, producing many hormones including the growth hormone for rebuilding, and a

hormone called *ghrelin* which is important in regulating hunger and ultimately our weight and health.

Another aspect of sleep quality is airway, meaning, is your body and brain getting enough oxygen? The tongue is attached to the lower jaw, so if the lower jaw drops back at night, the airway is blocked and the body does not get enough oxygen. This may happen to varying degrees, in its mildest form you may snore and in its worst form you may stop breathing many times a night for periods which can vary from seconds to minutes, called obstructive sleep apnoea.

Prepare For A Good Night's Sleep

- Make a point of going to bed early. Remember seven to eight hours a night. Simple but very effective.
- Start to wind down and relax for 30-60 mins before going to bed. Answering emails or watching television in bed is not the way to prepare for sleep.
- Do not eat for two or three hours before bed.
- Do not drink too much fluid for an hour before bed; you are less likely to get up for the toilet
- Do not ignore snoring, or sleeping with someone who does. Both lead to a disturbed night's sleep. An excellent alternative, designed by your dentist, is thin plastic plates worn on the upper and lower teeth that holds the lower jaw forward, maintains the airway throughout the night.

Breathing Well

All diseases start with an imbalance in body chemistry, specifically an imbalance in the pH (acid-base balance). The pH is affected by how we breathe and what we eat.

Breathing is not really something many people think of. We think it comes naturally, but that may not really be the case. It is such a basic thing we do, seemingly simple, yet so often overlooked when thinking about chronic health problems.

Are you a mouth breather or do you always breathe through your nose? The answer to that question may determine the shape of your palate and upper jaw, which also affects the nasal passages and your ability to breathe well. Ideally, from the moment we are born, we should breathe through our noses with our mouth closed and our tongue resting on the roof of our mouth. This is also important because nasal-breathing warms, filters and humidifies the air, reducing respiratory irritation and keeping our body chemistry in balance.

Our tongues are nature's orthodontic appliances ensuring that our palates are broad and flat providing enough room to fit all teeth (sixteen in both jaws) that nature provided us with. The palate also determines the room for our lower jaw, both its position and the available space for our teeth. Ever wondered why teeth may not be straight? The position of the lower jaw also affects the airway when you are awake, as well as asleep. The roof of the mouth is also the floor of the nose. So, the shape of the palate affects airway and airway affects posture. We will always position our head to get the best airway possible. If the mouth and nose is narrow then we will tilt our head to get the best airway.

Another problem with mouth breathing is that it frequently involves over breathing. We should ideally breathe 8-12 breaths/minute. Over breathing more than that affects body chemistry, specifically the pH of our blood. When breathing is out of balance the pH of our blood also becomes imbalanced and this can affect our health in many ways including:

- Smooth muscle contractions: found in blood vessels - affecting blood pressure; digestive system - affecting digestion and absorption of nutrients; bladder and urinary system - affecting frequent urination, like getting up through the night to go to the toilet; and respiratory tract - affecting our ability to breathe more easily. In fact every system in our body is affected by smooth muscle contraction.
- Energy: blood should have a pH of 7.35-7.45. Even slight variations outside this range affect the ability of haemoglobin in our red blood cells to release oxygen and provide energy to cells. Basically, energy levels can be affected by an imbalance in breathing.

Nature provided us with 32 teeth - 16 in both upper and lower jaws. Yet 80% of the population does not have enough room for all of those teeth. Think about how many people you know who have had their wisdom teeth out, teeth removed because of crowding or just teeth that are crooked, overlapped or simply out of alignment. Did nature make a mistake with the number of teeth we were given? This is so much more than just a cosmetic issue, although having straight teeth is nice.

Improve Your Breathing

- Become aware of your breathing and posture.
- Respiratory physiologists can assess your breathing pattern and advise some exercises to help.
- Consult an ear, nose and throat specialist to eliminate any major problems or obstructions.
- Consult a dentist who is aware of the connection between the shape

and position of your jaws, airway, breathing and posture.

Eating Well - How and What to Eat

We all know it is important to eat well. Provided we get enough sleep, we then have enough mental energy to make rational decisions.

The purpose of eating, basically, is to absorb nutrients. How we eat plays a big part in how well we absorb those nutrients. Teeth are designed to break food down into a smaller, more absorbable form. Taking your time and chewing your food not only breaks down the size but also mixes it together with saliva, so how you eat is an important part in digesting and absorbing nutrients.

Chewing is a habit and again not something that people give much thought to, but there are a few reasons why people might not chew their food for as long as they should -

- Their jaws may click or their teeth are not aligned, meaning their ability to chew properly may be out of balance. It is just more comfortable to eat and swallow quickly.
- Mouth breathing. We know it is socially unacceptable to eat with your mouth open. If you are a mouth breather you want to eat and swallow quickly so you can breathe.
- You are stressed and in a hurry. Being stressed reduces the blood supply to your digestive system so it is not working as efficiently as it should

So much has been written about what to eat and I do not want to add to the confusion, so here are a few points to consider.

- It has taken us over two million years to evolve as humans to the point we are at now. We have not changed genetically in the last 10,000 years, yet would our genes recognise the vast array of food on offer, or its sheer abundance?
- Over the last 30 years we have been told to eat low fat, eat more grain and sugar than in our history and now we are more obese than ever. Eating this type of diet suppresses and shuts down Leptin, an important hormone that tells our body when we have had enough to eat, so we over eat and obesity becomes an epidemic.
- Just as cattle are fattened on grains that are totally unnatural to them - nature designed they eat grass - humans too are being fattened on a diet which is based on grains that are also totally unnatural. We are now fatter and sicker than ever.
- Eat whole food that is natural and nutrient dense. Lots of vegetables, good natural fats, a little bit of meat.

Remember, sleep well, breathe well, eat well and you will be well! ❖

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