

live healthy



Wake up energized

Having to drag yourself out of bed even after a good seven hours means something's off. Your hormones may be the culprit. Find out how to reset them.

By CELESTE PERRON

The secret to morning motivation

You got plenty of sleep, and yet it takes Herculean strength to move from the mattress. If this is a typical morning for you, don't blame it on laziness. Studies have recently confirmed the physiological reason behind your a.m. exhaustion: Your cortisol levels are out of whack.

While we usually think of cortisol as affecting stress, it's also responsible for making you feel alert and awake. Normally, as morning approaches, your level of the hormone begins to rise—gradually at first, to draw you out of the deeper phases of sleep, and then

more dramatically, to help you pry your eyes open. This boost, known as the cortisol awakening response (CAR), is like a shot of espresso. Besides giving you mental energy, it also gets your body primed and ready for the day ahead by stimulating your digestive, central

nervous, and cardiovascular systems, all of which power down at night, says Katarina Dedovic, Ph.D., a researcher at the Douglas Mental Health University Institute at McGill University. Within a half hour of your alarm going off, your cortisol level will have risen by roughly

50 percent, and you'll be ready to dive into your morning routine.

That is, unless your hormone response has gone haywire. Factors like chronic stress, nutritional shortfalls, bad bedtime habits, and even your body clock can mess with your CAR, explains Shawn Talbott, Ph.D., the author of *The Cortisol Connection*. "Cortisol normally follows a pattern of being high in the morning and subsiding over the course of the day, with temporary spikes in response to stressful events," Talbott explains. If you're always stressed, though, the hormone is released more frequently, and its level remains high when it shouldn't be. One of the ways your body compensates for the excess cortisol is by suppressing your CAR, Dedovic explains. As a result, you wake up feeling sluggish and exhausted.

Cortisol is also closely connected to our individual circadian rhythms. Some people's internal clocks are hardwired to kick in later in the morning. If you're a night owl, it's possible that your CAR is occurring a few hours after your alarm goes off, which is the reason it's so hard for you to get up.

The good news is that there are things you can do to reset your CAR and make it more powerful and effective. Try the following simple science-backed strategies and you should notice an improvement in your morning energy levels within six weeks.

Leave work where it belongs: at work

When researchers at the University of Surrey in the U.K. looked at the behaviors of teachers, they found that those who obsessed over their classroom problems before going to sleep were

found to have a suppressed CAR the following morning. That's probably because when cortisol levels are consistently high at night, the body compensates by releasing less of the hormone at wake-up time, Dedovic says. "Spend an hour or two before bed doing relaxing activities that take your mind off work and other tense situations you may be dealing with," she recommends. First order of business: Quit checking your work email. And if exercise is your go-to stress buster, stick with relaxing workouts like yoga in the three hours before bedtime. Vigorous workouts bump up your cortisol level and therefore could disrupt your sleep, Dedovic says.

Make your mornings more important

People have a stronger CAR on workdays than on weekends, according

SCIENCE PROVES IT: HIT SNOOZE AND YOU LOSE

Those extra nine minutes of shut-eye the snooze button offers seem like heaven. But try to resist them. "The clock should be a form of classic conditioning: You hear the sound, you wake up and get out of bed," says David Brown, Ph.D., a sleep psychologist at Children's Medical Center in Dallas. "When you hit the snooze button, the alarm loses its power." And because this drags out the waking process, when you do finally get up you feel groggy.

To break yourself of the habit, use your smartphone as your alarm clock for a few weeks; most let you turn off the snooze feature entirely. Set the alarm for different times each day, varying them by at least 15 minutes—7:00 a.m., then 6:45 a.m., then 7:15 a.m., for example. People who were awakened at an unexpected time each morning experienced a sharper spike in their cortisol levels, and thus were more alert, than those who rose at a planned exact time, according to research in the journal *Nature*. To get the same benefit without having to do the math, get an app like **Sleep Time** (free, Android and iOS). It wakes you up within a preset time range every day, instead of at a specific time, and also allows you to opt out of snooze mode.



POWER DOWN

Log out of work email at least 60 minutes before bed to give yourself ample time to unwind.

to research in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*. Another study revealed that ballroom dancers experienced bigger boosts on the day of a major tournament. Why? When you know you have a busy day ahead, you start anticipating everything there is to do before you're even fully awake. And that increases your body's production of cortisol, leading to a more pronounced morning spike. To rev up your CAR every day, schedule a.m. activities that you can get excited about. Sign up for a challenging early workout class, go a few miles with a morning running buddy, or meet up with a friend for breakfast instead of your usual postwork drinks.

Another smart tactic to help you get out of bed: Make your mornings as easy and automatic as possible, advises Shalini Paruthi, M.D., a sleep doctor at Saint Louis University. Get a coffee machine with a timer so you can wake up to a fresh-brewed mug, place a cozy robe and slippers within arm's reach, and have an outfit for the day picked out and your purse packed and ready. The less work you have to do to get going, the more the likelihood that you won't keep snoozing.

Let in the light

Use a dawn-simulating alarm clock, which gradually brightens the room and eases your body out of sleep. Check

your phone and throw open the blinds. The more light you expose yourself to in the morning, the easier waking up will be, says Phil Gehrman, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. "When light hits your eyes, certain receptors send signals to an area of your brain known as the hypothalamus," he says. This almond-size spot affects your body's production of cortisol. Both early-morning rays and phone or tablet backlight give off similar bluish short-wavelength beams that boost cortisol levels while lowering the production of drowsiness-inducing melatonin. But many lightbulbs

emit a yellow-tinged light that may not have the same impact on your CAR, so don't rely solely on switching on your bedside lamp.

Eat the right energizing foods

Berries, citrus, and certain teas are rich in flavonoids. These plant compounds have been shown to reduce excess cortisol during the day and, as a result, set you up for a bigger, more energizing boost the following morning, Talbott says. He suggests eating a half cup of berries and drinking two to four cups of brewed green, oolong, or black tea daily. Other good sources of flavonoids include red onions, black beans, and (happily) wine. ★

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