

To sleep: perchance to dream

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"Sleep is the best medicine," says the old proverb. But many adults don't benefit enough from sleep, with as many as 60 percent reporting sleep problems at least several nights a week.



If you are sleep-deprived because of health problems, medical treatment is available, says Dr. Supat Thammastiboon of the Tulane Comprehensive Sleep Center. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Approximately 40 million Americans suffer from sleep deprivation, and the consequences can be serious, including accidents while working or driving. Untreated long-term sleep problems can lead to heart disease, mood disorders, weight gain and shortened life spans.

"Sleep researchers understand that sleep is not just a luxury; it's extremely important," says Dr. Supat Thammastiboon, medical director of the [Tulane Comprehensive Sleep Center](#) at Tulane Medical Center, which provides clinical care for sleep disorder patients.

"Our time asleep is when we repair a lot of our systems," says Thammastiboon, who directs the Tulane University School of Medicine's sleep medicine fellowship program.

Sleep deprivation can be caused by social or behavioral factors, including shift work schedules and college late-night study patterns, or it can be the result of health issues.

“If a person is sleep-deprived because their lifestyle restricts their sleep, they just have to change their behavior,” says Thammastiboon. “But if they are sleep-deprived because of health problems, we treat them medically.”

One such problem is sleep apnea, caused by obstruction of breathing passages. Snoring, interruption of sleep and fatigue when awake are among its symptoms. Insomnia and restless leg syndrome also keep some people from achieving deep, restful sleep.

“There are two levels of lighter sleep, and then there is level three, the deepest sleep,” says Thammastiboon. “During deep sleep your brain is working, abstracting and correlating new knowledge with previous knowledge.”

There are numerous cases of researchers, writers or musicians waking from deep sleep with sudden inspiration. Violinist Giuseppe Tartini dreamed the devil played the violin for him. He awoke and immediately wrote out the virtuoso composition known as “The Devil's Trill.”