

Managing Sleep Challenges During COVID 19

Many athletes report changes in sleep around stressful times and during times of changing training demands. If you are experiencing changes in your sleep, consider the suggestions below. There are many things you have control over regarding your sleep. The main thing to know is that the process of sleeping is not actually in your control. What is in your control is creating the conditions for sleep and giving yourself the opportunity to sleep. Review the “sleep stabilizers” as well as common issues seen in athletes in times of reduced training and be in touch with the Sport Psychology Team if you have additional questions.

Know your chronotype- Your chronotype is your biological preference of when to sleep, ranging from sleeping early/rising early, “the early bird” to sleeping late/rising late, “the night owl.” You could also consider this be the window of time that you find it easiest to fall asleep (when not staying up late on screens) to the time you find it easiest to get up and start your day. Typically, the teenage through early 20s years are characterized by a drift to the “night owl” type, where falling asleep happens after 11pm. Given that your training schedule has likely changed due to COVID 19, you may have more freedom to sleep when you want, as opposed to sleeping to meet your training times. If you’ve shifted your sleeping schedule to match your chronotype be aware that if you will return to early morning training, and you are a “night owl” it may take some effort to shift yourself back, for example, from a 1am bedtime earlier to a 9pm bedtime. You will have to be strategic with finding a balance between your training sleep schedule and your reduced training sleep schedule. Studies in elite athletes show that variability in bedtimes similar to the example given, are associated with lower sleep quality and longer times to fall asleep. Additionally, later than usual bedtimes decrease the amount of deep sleep that is obtained, and can reduce your natural GHG.

Stabilize your sleep- wake times- You want to have general windows of time where you will typically wake up and go to bed. Keeping these times as consistent as possible will help your internal clock function optimally. You can sleep longer if you have the opportunity, but after a few weeks of less training than usual, hopefully you’ve paid down some sleep debt and are sleeping closer to the ‘typical’ total amount of sleep you need on this lower than usual amount of training. Remember that when your sleep and wake times vary widely, you will likely feel sluggish upon awakening as the alerting systems in your brain don’t engage automatically. It’s like going from LA to NY and waking up for a media event at 8am ET. Your internal clock set to PT will leave you feeling like it’s 5am.

Increased sleep opportunity- With increased time at home, you have the opportunity in these first several weeks, to take advantage of increased time in bed. Allowing yourself a longer sleep opportunity should lead you to getting more sleep, and paying down the sleep debt you owe yourself. We all accumulate sleep debt when we sleep less than we need. When the debt is large, it acts as a burden on our physiology, on our mood and on the way our brains work. Once the debt is paid down, you will have a lower sleep need. Studies with athletes usually suggest spending 6 weeks with 10 hours nightly in bed to pay down sleep debt. If that sounds like too many hours to spend in bed, consider getting to bed 30 mins earlier or staying in bed 30 mins later and using smaller increments of increased sleep opportunity.

Change in physical demands of day- This temporary period of lower training demands could lead to a temporary lower a sleep need. You may realize that in a heavy period of training, you need 10.5 hours in bed (or more including naps) to feel recovered, and with this lower training volume you may only need 8.5 hours per night to feel recovered. Once your sleep debt is paid down, you might notice you feel ready to get up a little earlier/go to bed a little later. Try to be flexible with this approach to recovery and appropriate time in bed that will morph over the next several weeks. A good clue to pay attention to is how you’ve needed to adapt when you had lower training due to an injury or in an off period. If you’ve felt restless in bed during these times, you may want to pay attention to how much you are actually sleeping at night and structure your time in bed in accordance with that.

Basic sleep hygiene- You’ve probably heard that your bed should be for sleeping. This is true- when you eat, do work, watch shows, use social media, etc. in your bed, your brain can become confused about what to do at bedtime, and you can end up unintentionally creating sleep difficulties. Your room should be as dark as possible, so dark you can’t see your hand in front of your face in the night. An eye mask can help. Dim the lights before bed to help your brain know that it’s night. Consider getting a motion triggered night light for your hallway and bathroom. Your bedroom should be cool (some people like the room warmer, but our core body temperature should be the lowest during the middle of the night and you want to facilitate that). It’s normal to wake up in the night to get a drink, go to the bathroom, etc. This is fine (if it bothers you, you can consider slightly limiting food and liquid intake in the hours before bed). All you have to do is allow yourself to go back to sleep. Checking your phone when you’re awake can interfere with falling back asleep. Watch caffeine consumption. It takes, on average, 6 hours to break down half the caffeine you consume. That double shot of espresso you had at 2pm has about 80mg of caffeine. At 8 pm, you still have about 40mg of caffeine in your system, and that could be enough of a stimulant to interfere with your sleep. Alcohol can make you feel drowsy. Falling asleep may come easier, however, sleep becomes disrupted as the night goes on. Excessive alcohol intake suppresses dreaming sleep, and impairs learning and memory formation. Marijuana seems to change the composition of your sleep in a similar way, however there is less research on the topic than alcohol.

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