

# WANNA SWIM FASTER THIS YEAR? GET MORE SLEEPY TIME.

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## How Much Sleep Do Swimmers Need?

Swimmers push themselves hard in the pool. They try to make healthy life decisions when it comes to hydration and nutrition. But where many begin to cut corners is on their sleep.

Not getting enough sleep goes beyond just doing the occasional head-bob-and-jerk in class or in public. Or feeling a little groggy and yawning repeatedly while coach writes up a workout on the whiteboard.

At the Stanford Sleep Disorders Clinic and Research Laboratory Cheri Mah has been tracking and studying the sleeping habits of Stanford athletes, among them members of the men's and women's swim team, as well as the tennis and basketball teams.

Consistently across all sports she has found that performance, alertness and mood have been positively impacted when athletes invest in an extra 1-2 hours of sleep per night.

In the case of the swimmers, their performance was measured for two weeks using their traditional sleeping patterns, and then again after extending their sleep to 10 hours per night for 6-7 weeks.

The swimmers' performance improved in numerous areas:

- Reaction time off the blocks was 0.15 faster.
- A 15m sprint was on average 0.51 seconds faster.
- Turn time also increased by 0.10 seconds.

Here are some strategies for making sleep a part of your success equation this season:

### 1. The first step is making sleep a priority.

The life of a swimmer that is in school is a profoundly busy one. Juggling homework and two-a-days is tough stuff. When those assignments start to catch up on us we begin cutting corners on our sleep. Understanding that getting adequate rest is a priority of your training and recovery is critical. Make sleep a priority by creating a bed-time ritual and by making your room dark and cool.

### 2. If you can, nap it out.

If you are running on less than optimal amount of sleep, and you have time between your AM and PM practice, take a nap. Researchers (Waterhouse et al. 2007) found that just a 30 minute nap was enough to increase alertness, decrease sleepiness, and in comparison to the athletes who did not nap following a 4 hour night of rest, improved their sprint performance.

### 3. Wake up at the same time every day.

Instead of forcing yourself to go to bed at a specific time — which often only induces sleep-stress (“*Okay, okay, if I fall asleep right now I can still get 5.5 hours of sleep...*”) wake up at the same time each day. Do this for a little while and you will find that your body will tell you when it is time to go to bed, instead of you having to force sleep on yourself when you aren't necessarily primed for it.

### 4. Avoid caffeine before bed.

Sounds obvious, but I have been guilty of this as well – there is work/homework to be done, and having some coffee or an energy drink is ingested in order to ward off the fatigue and retain some level of focus and concentration. Depending on your tolerance to caffeine, try to avoid it 4-6 hours before bed.

### 5. Don't freak out about one bad night of sleep.

There will always be nights where you just can't fall asleep. You are stressed about a big test, a big race, or a big blow-out you had with your boyfriend/girlfriend. The effects of having one bad night of sleep are fairly limited in terms of straight physical performance; a group of 8 swimmers were tracked after only sleeping for 2.5 hours for 4 consecutive nights (Sinnerton & Reilly, 1992). Back and grip strength, lung capacity and swimming performance were not affected. However, the psychological effects were profound; the swimmers experienced increased depression, tension and fatigue. Most notably, while they were performing the same, perceived effort was much higher. In fact, it only took one bad night of sleep to significantly impair psychomotor function.

### 6. Get more carbs to get through the sleep deprived days.

If you need to power your way through a day where you didn't sleep great the night before, ingest more carbohydrates (Reilly & Edwards, 2007). Battling fatigue requires extra energy, and those carbs will help you stay functioning at a reasonable level until you can make up the sleep deficit.