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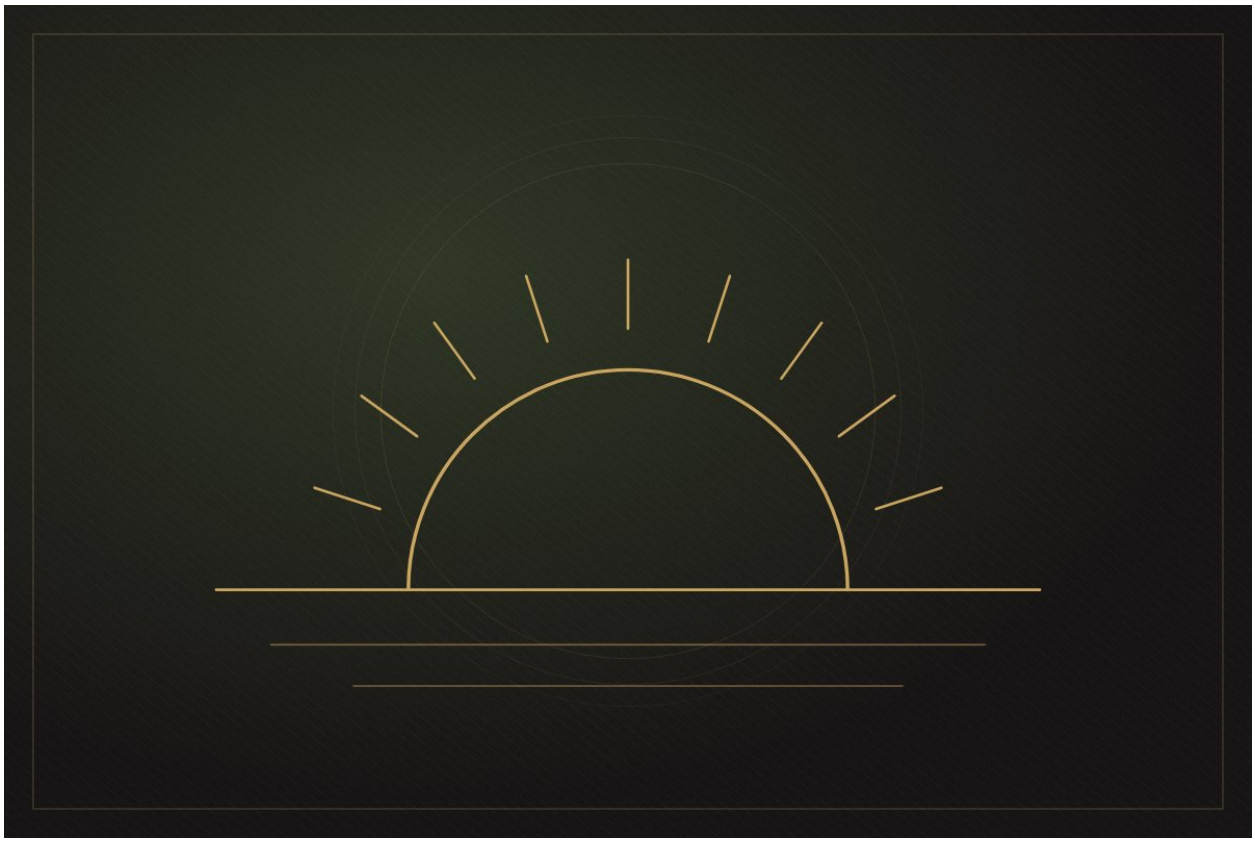
Body

The daytime nap: how many minutes help and when it harms

What studies say about the siesta, why 10–20 minutes is often enough and when it is better avoided

3 November 2026 / 5 min read

Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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After lunch, many people feel a dip in energy. This is not only about food: our internal daily rhythm has a natural fall in alertness in the early afternoon. In many Mediterranean cultures, including our own, a short rest at this time has long been a habit.

What studies say

In a 2009 review, the psychologists Catherine Milner and Kimberly Cote summarised research on daytime napping in adults. Short naps were linked with better alertness, reaction time, memory and mood, especially in people who had not slept enough at night. The effects were visible even in people who had slept normally.

Why length matters

When we sleep longer, we pass into the stages of deep sleep. If we wake from them, we feel heavy, slow and somewhat confused for several minutes up to half an hour. This is called **sleep inertia**. That is why a short nap, about **10–20 minutes**, often gives a quicker benefit: we wake before going deep into sleep. A longer nap, about 60–90 minutes, may help memory more, but needs time to recover from after waking.

> *A good nap is not a substitute for the night. It is a small rest that helps the day go on.*

When it can harm

- **If you have insomnia.** Daytime sleep can reduce the need for sleep in the evening and make falling asleep harder. In treating insomnia, it is often advised to avoid it.
- **If it is too late.** Naps after 3–4 pm are more likely to disturb night-time sleep.
- **If it suddenly becomes very long and frequent.** Some observational studies have linked long daytime naps in older adults with health problems. This does not mean napping causes them; it may be a sign of something else, such as poor night sleep or illness. If you feel a new and strong need to sleep during the day, talk to your doctor.

NASA’s pilots

One of the best-known studies of short naps was carried out in aircraft cockpits. In the early 1990s Mark Rosekind and colleagues at NASA studied pilots on long transoceanic flights. One group of pilots had the opportunity to rest in turn for 40 minutes during the flight while a colleague kept flying; the other group did not rest. The pilots who rested slept on average about 26 minutes, and afterwards they reacted faster in vigilance tests and had fewer brief episodes of drowsiness in the last part of the flight, when the risk is greatest. Today some airlines allow this planned rest in the cockpit.

The Greek siesta

Is the midday nap linked to the heart? In 2007 Androniki Naska and colleagues followed more than twenty thousand Greek adults for about six years. Those who took a regular siesta, at least three times a week for about half an hour, had fewer deaths from

coronary heart disease than those who never napped at midday. The effect was clearest among working men. The study was observational and included only people without serious disease at the start, but the authors suggested that reduced stress might be one explanation.

Coffee before the nap?

It sounds absurd, but some researchers have tested it. Caffeine needs about 20 to 30 minutes to start working. In 2003 Mitsuo Hayashi and colleagues in Japan compared several ways of waking up after a short nap. Participants who drank coffee just before a nap of about 20 minutes were more alert after waking than those who only slept, or who after the nap washed their face or looked at bright light. The caffeine was kicking in just as they woke up. This method is not for the evening, because caffeine can spoil the night's sleep.

When long daytime sleep is a sign

In older people, some large studies have found that long and frequent daytime sleep is linked to a higher risk of illness and memory decline. This does not necessarily mean that daytime sleep causes these problems. Often it is the opposite: an increased need for sleep during the day may be an early sign of poor sleep at night or of an illness that is beginning. If someone who did not sleep during the day before starts needing hours of sleep, it is worth discussing with a doctor.

Daytime sleep in children and students

In young children, daytime sleep is a normal part of development and usually fades gradually between the ages of three and five. In students and adolescents, a lot of daytime sleep is often the result of insufficient sleep at night, especially when the internal clock pushes them to sleep late while school starts early. In these cases a short afternoon nap may help for a while, but the real solution is a more regular schedule and more sleep at night. A long afternoon nap can make it even harder to fall asleep in the evening, creating a cycle that keeps repeating itself day after day.

How to do it well

1. **Choose the time**: usually between 1 and 3 pm.
2. **Set an alarm** for 20 minutes. Even if you do not sleep, resting with your eyes closed has value.
3. **Make the setting quiet**: little light, little noise, a place where you can lie down or lean back.

4. **After waking**, get up, move a little, drink water and go into the light.

Sources

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