

The A, B, C's of ZZZ's
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Our bodies are programmed to heal and grow each night while we sleep. Sleep is vital to our health and ideally we need 7 to 8 hours of uninterrupted rest per night to not just function, but to be truly healthy. A key factor that determines whether we are optimally healing and growing during this time or halting these processes and maybe even injuring ourselves is the posture in which we sleep. Patients commonly ask me what is the best or ideal spinal posture in which to sleep so as to avoid “tweaking” their necks or waking up with raging headaches.

Before we address this issue, I would like to describe to you three spinal postures that are potentially damaging to your spine and thus, your nervous system. *First*, whether you are sitting or standing, look down at your knees while keeping your shoulders still. Now close your eyes and focus on the stressed sensation at the back of your neck. *Second*, tilt your left ear to the left shoulder and again hold, close your eyes and focus on the stressed feeling at the right side of your neck. *Lastly*, turn your head all the way over your left shoulder, close your eyes, and hold. Now, imagine holding any one or a combination of these positions for 7 to 8 hours. Are you cringing? Well you should be. These exercises illustrate poor sleeping postures that lead to, or exacerbate, already established spinal stress and put stress on your central nervous system. Why is this so important? Because stress to your central nervous system at these areas of your spine lead to more than just a stiff neck. It leads to headaches, chronic neck and back pain, insomnia, temporomandibular joint pain (TMJ), ringing in ears, vertigo, and many other health issues. So what are the most ideal sleeping postures? There are two: side sleeping and back sleeping. However, even in these positions, there are proper and improper ways to avoid causing stress to your spine.

The first description above simulates sleeping on your back with one large or several pillows behind your head. If you prefer to sleep in this posture, it is paramount that you sleep with as little under your head as possible. Now, because most Americans lead the laptop/desk jockey lifestyle that causes repetitive stress to one's spine, this often causes vertebrae of the neck to misalign and eventually takes the curvature out of the neck leading to a straight spine. Studies indicate that people with either decreased or no forward curvature in their necks also have many of the health issues described in the previous paragraph. Sleeping with multiple or even one thick pillow beneath your head will support the same exact poor neck posture many live with day in and day out. If you sleep with two pillows, immediately bring yourself down to one, and if you already sleep with one try sleeping without a pillow (which is ideal). Or as an alternative, place a small rolled towel at the large bump on the base of the back of your neck and let your head fall over resting on your mattress.

The second description above simulates sleeping on your side. In this position it is vital that you keep your spine straight. This means taking your pillow and rolling it up and placing it beneath your head so that it fills the void between your ear and the mattress. Ask a partner or look in the mirror to be certain your spine is straight if necessary. To

have a pillow that is either too thick or too thin will cause stress at the side of your neck opposite the way your head is tilted. This also can cause vertebrae misalignments leading to a multitude of health issues including, but not limited to, the ones described above.

The third description originally presented describes sleeping on your chest or stomach and is the worst posture to assume while sleeping. In this posture the most stress is put on the neck and vertebrae become very easily fixated in a rotated position. This is the reason why most people find it comfortable to turn their heads one way over the other when sleeping on their stomach. Unfortunately, there is no way to do this safely and I eagerly advise against this.

Originally, we stated that sleep is when your body grows and heals. Integrating the above suggestions into your normal sleep routine will be a one significant act you can do to leading a more optimal and healthy lifestyle.

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