

We asked experts the question that's all over our social media feeds.

By Melinda Wenner Moyer

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Q: I've heard that women need several hours more sleep per night than men do. Is this true?

If you browse social media for information on healthy sleep habits, you may stumble across one of the many posts arguing that women require more sleep than men — “dramatically more sleep,” some even claim. The reasons given vary, including hormonal differences and the notion that women have faster-working brains than men do.

As it turns out, we don't have any legitimate research that suggests these claims are true.

“There is no evidence that there is a fundamental biological reason women need more sleep,” said Dr. Suzanne Bertisch, a physician specializing in sleep disorders at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

On average, women do seem to spend several more minutes in bed every night than men do, but that doesn't mean they require more sleep, she said.

Men and Women Sleep Differently

Only a handful of studies have evaluated differences in sleep duration among men and women. In a landmark study from 2013, researchers analyzed survey data from more than 56,000 adults in the United States. When participants were asked how they spent their time over a recent 24-hour period, women reported devoting an average of 11 minutes more to sleep the previous night than men did.

This didn't necessarily mean that the women actually slept for 11 minutes more than men, however. As the study explained, the time participants reported also included the minutes they spent attempting to sleep — and women are far more likely than men to experience insomnia, said Rebecca Robbins, a sleep scientist and assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. The 2013 study also found that women were nearly five times as likely as men to report sleep interruptions as a result of caregiving, usually for a child.

Research suggests that women experience lower quality sleep, on average, than men do — whether they're caregivers or not. In a 2023 online survey of more than 2,000 adults from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, for instance, researchers found that women were nearly twice as likely as men to say they rarely or never wake up feeling well rested.

What Sinks Women's Sleep

As for why women tend to sleep more poorly than men, researchers don't have clear answers. But they do have some theories.

The hormone progesterone is linked with better sleep, and when progesterone dips just before menstruation, women tend to sleep more poorly, said Shelby Harris, a clinical psychologist in New York City who specializes in sleep disorders. Women often report sleep difficulties during the time leading up to and after menopause, too, when hormone levels change.

Compared with men, women also tend to do more caregiving and housework, which could make it harder for women to fall and stay asleep. Remembering to pick up the dry cleaning, check in with relatives, take the kids to school and schedule doctor's appointments — “all of those little things can contribute to worry, and worry and stress are two of the biggest disruptions to our sleep,” Dr. Robbins said.

Sleep disorders like insomnia, sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome become more common in women as they age. Women with sleep apnea often go undiagnosed, because they aren't as likely as men to have certain telltale symptoms like snoring

or waking up gasping for air, said Dr. Rachel Salas, a neurologist and sleep medicine specialist at Johns Hopkins Medicine.

How to Know if You're Getting Enough Rest

The length of time people sleep — and the quality of that sleep — doesn't tell us anything about how much sleep they should be getting. "Those aren't necessarily the same thing," Dr. Robbins said.

The National Sleep Foundation says that adults generally need somewhere between seven and nine hours of sleep each night, but the exact amount can vary from person to person, Dr. Harris said. "There's no one magic number," she said.

Dr. Robbins added that it can be helpful to track your sleep with a smartwatch or other tracking device to ensure you're getting at least seven hours a night. But often, the best way to tell if you're getting enough sleep is to gauge how you feel during the day. If you're regularly exhausted, that could be a sign that you're not getting enough sleep and could even have a sleep disorder.

"If you feel you get enough sleep, but you're still tired or are having problems staying awake," Dr. Salas said, "those are reasons to talk to your doctor."