

Typically, a 90-minute to two-hour nap carries the body out of its first REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, the stage in which a person dreams.  
chronicle illustration



**Dec. 27, 2006, 5:32AM**

SNOOZE TIME

Just 20 winks

Naps can help you catch up on sleep, alleviate stress

By MAGGIE GALEHOUSE

Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

## **FAMOUS NAPPERS**

- **Bill Clinton** takes 30-minute naps at 3 p.m. when he can.
- **Eleanor Roosevelt** often took naps before speaking engagements.
- **John D. Rockefeller** napped in his office every afternoon.
- **Connie Mack** napped before games.
- **Gene Autry** napped between performances in his dressing room.

---

## **BEST CONDITIONS FOR A NAP**

- Mid-afternoon
- Cold room
- Warm blanket
- Darkness (blackout curtains, if possible)

Right there, near the top of the best-known Christmas poem ever, the craving that cuts across all holiday traditions takes hold:

And mamma in her 'kerchief and I in my cap

Had just settled down for a long winter's nap.

Ah, yes. A nap. A warm little cup of sleep.

Most of us use the holidays to catch up on sleep we've lost the rest of the year. And since December is all about heaping on additional stress — shopping, in-laws, 14 different types of cookies that must be made or the world as we know it will cease to have meaning — our bodies end up aching for some shut-eye.

"We're biologically programmed to take a nap in midafternoon," says Max Hirshkowitz, an associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine who also directs the Sleep Center at Houston's Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center. "It's the Industrial Revolution that separated us from siesta, because it was too expensive to shut down big machines in the middle of the day and turn them back on."

Even so, napping gets a bad rap, particularly in the current 24/7 culture.

"In the United States, we have this drive to be busy all the time," says Anne Frey, a dream practitioner and instructor at the University of Indianapolis. "If we nap, we're seen as lazy or trying to avoid something. In part, I blame it on economics. People are so driven for the dollar that taking a nap is considered wasting time."

Most of us don't have the luxury of taking a long nap at home. During the week, a 20-minute power nap is perfect for a workday afternoon. Experts say if you're lucky enough to have a workspace where you can shut your eyes or a company that sanctions a midafternoon snooze (and good luck with that), you'll be more productive for the rest of the day.

"A power nap is targeted for productivity, similar to meditation, yoga or exercise," says Sara Mednick, a researcher at the Salk Institute and author of the new book *Take a Nap! Change Your Life*. "It can really be 10 or 15 minutes of your lunch break."

A truly gifted power napper could catch the same snooze in a busy public place; park benches and airports are popular nap spots.

But the leisurely home nap, the type you might actually steal time for over the holidays, is a different story.

"A lot of people come into vacation sleep-deprived and use the holiday to catch up on sleep," Mednick says. "Naps are great. You can have an hour and a half, get a break from

the in-laws and some private time with your mate, and catch up on sleep you haven't been getting."

During a nap, we reduce what experts call our "sleep debt" and pay the body back some of the sleep it needs.

"I take a two-hour nap," Yogi Berra once said, "from one o'clock to four."

The types of behavior that interrupt healthy sleep patterns — overeating, drinking too much, staying up late — are patterns people tend to fall into during the holidays.

"The amazing thing is, when your brain needs to store sleep, it will take sleep, whether you're in bed or behind the wheel of a car," says Hirshkowitz, who co-wrote *Sleep Disorders for Dummies*. "And alcohol intensifies sleep debt. If you're sleep-deprived and you have one beer, that's the equivalent of drinking three beers."

The ideal situation for an afternoon nap at home is a cold room, a warm blanket and total darkness. Even so, some people can sleep amid rowdy kids and a blaring TV.

"The beauty of this is that everybody's different," Mednick says. "For me, I'm happy on the couch in my clothes. I don't want to go to bed, because I don't want to commit to bed sleep."

Typically, a 90-minute to two-hour nap carries the body out of its first REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, the stage in which a person dreams. In REM sleep, the body is quite still, but the brain is incredibly active, sometimes more active than when one is awake.

And for those who are nap-challenged, here's some good news. Napping can be learned.

"Part of it is trial and error, and part of it is habit," Frey says. "They say it takes 21 days to develop a habit, and you can learn to nap in 21 days because your body becomes adjusted to routine. If you decide you're going to take a nap every afternoon, and you go and lie down, with time you'll be able to start falling asleep."

Hirshkowitz describes it a different way.

It is a conditioned response, he says, like Pavlov's dogs. If you associate a taxicab with sleep and only try to nap in a cab when you're really sleepy, a cab will ultimately help promote sleep.

But it doesn't have to be a cab. It can be a dark corner of your home, a lounge area at work or a seat on an airplane.

"It's like taking a nice long bath," Mednick says, "but it's good for your brain."

[maggie.galehouse@chron.com](mailto:maggie.galehouse@chron.com)