

Sleep tips to sharpen your skills

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Study after study has shown healthy sleep to be an essential part of elite athletic performance.

UC San Francisco sleep expert Cheri Mah works with the Golden State Warriors (below) and other elite athletes to help them gain a competitive edge.

For example, in **basketball she has found that extended sleep can improve free-throw and three-point shooting by 9 per cent.**



To step up your game, follow Mah's six tips for better sleep.

1. Sleep at least seven hours a night. Elite athletes should get even more.

“For elite athletes, we recommend eight to 10 hours plus every night,” Mah says. “For the everyday person, you’ve got to hit at least seven hours of rest every night. There are individual differences in daily sleep needs, however, so you may need eight hours or nine-plus hours to feel rested and alert throughout the day.”

2. Maintain a regular bedtime and wake-up time.

“Our bodies like regularity and will anticipate sleep with a regular sleep schedule,” Mah says. “As a reminder, set a daily alarm on your phone to go off 30 minutes before you want to start your wind-down routine.”



UC San Francisco sleep expert Cheri Mah, shown here with cyclist Kurt Wolfgang

3. Implement a wind-down routine.

“A 20 to 30 minute wind-down helps you transition to sleep,” Mah advises. “Reading is great – a real book, not an iPad or phone that emits blue frequencies of light, which can negatively impact sleep. For athletes, I recommend stretching or yoga. Many individuals don’t have a routine and they’ll jump into bed and have a racing mind (and difficulty sleeping).”

4. Evaluate your sleep environment.

“Make your room like a cave,” Mah says. “You want it to be really dark, quiet and cool as well as comfortable. For darkness, I recommend blackout curtains; some people prefer eye masks. For quiet, use earbuds or earplugs. For cool, set your temperature at 60 to 67 degrees.”

5. Reduce your intake of alcohol and caffeine.

“Drinking alcohol or caffeine at night can impact sleep,” warns Mah. “Alcohol fragments sleep, particularly in the early morning hours. Caffeine has a half-life of about six hours, so it’s best to cut out caffeine in the late afternoon and evening.”

6. Take power naps.

“Power naps are great,” Mah says. “Keep naps short. I recommend 20 to 30 minute naps. For athletes, I do recommend pre-game naps. Naps can give you a temporary improvement in alertness and performance for a few hours. Naps are not a replacement for consolidated and healthy sleep at nighttime. If you’re having difficulty with your sleep, you should eliminate naps.”