

THE HOTTEST NEW TRAINING PROGRAM TAKES EIGHT HOURS A DAY—
BUT IT'S SO SIMPLE YOU CAN DO IT WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED.
ILLUSTRATION BY ZFACE
BY LISA FIELDS

FAST ASLEEP

TAKING YOUR FITNESS TO A NEW level might have as much to do with sack time as saddle time: Many cyclists are chronically sleep deprived, says Warren "IronDoc" Scott, MD, a California-based sports-medicine physician who says he routinely sees athletes who train hard but sleep only six hours a night then complain of fatigue. "It's like forgetting to put air in your tires," he says. ■ When you skimp on slumber you feel tired and less alert—of course—but you also increase your chance of illness and injury because you're robbing your body of crucial time it needs to recharge and rebuild, according to Scott and other experts, such as Charles Samuels, MD, director of the Centre for Sleep & Human Performance, in Calgary. Conversely, getting enough shut-eye is so beneficial that Roger Smith, DO, a Harvard Medical School sleep expert, likens it to a natural performance enhancer. ■ How much is enough? All of our experts recommend eight to 10 hours. Scott suggests that the best way to ensure adequate rest is to go to bed when you first feel tired, then sleep until you wake naturally (with no alarm). Here's how a perfect night might go—and why it matters.

Health writer Lisa Fields sleeps eight hours a night, even with two kids.

- 8:00 p.m.** Go ahead and exercise a little in the evening—contrary to popular belief, it won't cause sleeplessness. "Research doesn't indicate that," says Shawn Youngstedt, PhD, a professor of exercise science at the University of South Carolina. "Three out of four people who exercise at night say it doesn't impair sleep; most say it helps."
- 10:30 p.m.** Soak in a hot bath for 10 to 15 minutes just before bed, and the heat will raise your core body temperature, helping you fall asleep quicker and stay asleep longer, says William Sands, PhD, of the U.S. Olympic Committee Recovery Center, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.
- 11:30 p.m.** If you toss and turn for half an hour after getting into bed, you might be overanalyzing your day or anxious about your workouts, says Sands: "It's hard for athletes to shut off their minds. Their thoughts race back to a bad workout or something they want to try differently." To slow down your mind, listen to music or soothe your body by tensing then relaxing muscle groups from your toes upward. If you have trouble falling asleep and have achy joints and diarrhea, says Sands, you might be overtraining—take a few days off.
- 12:00 a.m.** You cycle through 90-minute phases composed of light sleep, deep sleep and even deeper rapid-eye movement (REM) sleep. The three components vary in length as the night progresses. During the first half of the night, deep sleep dominates. That's when your body releases growth hormone and accomplishes a lot of recovery and muscle repair, says Samuels, who works with Olympic athletes. [This process is so important that your body responds to exercise by lengthening deep sleep periods.]
- 2:00 a.m.** When you switch from REM sleep to light sleep, you may awaken briefly and feel the urge to visit the bathroom. "It's probably better to roll over and go back to sleep," says Joyce Walsleben, associate professor of medicine at New York University and spokesperson for the National Sleep Foundation. If you can't, keep the light off so your body can continue to produce the sleep-inducing hormone melatonin, which is made in the dark.
- 3:00 a.m.** REM sleep takes precedence halfway through the night. This phase, which is associated with dreaming, helps your mind refresh. "The problem is, most REM sleep takes place in the morning, and people wake up too soon," says Samuels.
- 5:00 a.m.** Don't cut your sleep short to fit in a ride, advises Samuels: "If you force yourself to wake at 4 or 5, you're losing almost half your REM sleep."
- 7:00 a.m.** If you get up at 6 or 7 with about eight hours of sleep, you're probably well rested, says Samuels. If you routinely need an alarm, go to bed an hour earlier.
- 8:00 a.m.** Assuming you went to sleep at 11:00, this is a good time to wake up if you're riding a lot. A Stanford University study found that college athletes improved their athletic performance merely by switching from 7.5 hours to at least 10 hours of sleep per night. ⓑ