Why is sleep so important?

Research suggests that most people need between 7.5 and 8.5 hours of sleep per night to be able to function optimally. However, this may differ depending on your own sleep needs.

Sleep stages:

Stages 1-2: light sleep. This is the first type of sleep you go through in each cycle. This is a non-dreaming stage of sleep.

Stages 3-4: deeper sleep. These stages come after the first two, and are harder to wake from. This is the kind of sleep that you are less likely to be woken from by outside noise/light.

REM: dreaming sleep. REM stands for rapid eye movement, and is an indicator that you are dreaming. In this kind of sleep your brain activity is similar to being awake, but it has been suggested that this kind of sleep is particularly restorative and helpful in solidifying learning and memory.

During each night of sleep, you will go through a number of approximately 90 minute cycles, which include all of these stages of sleep. If you wake up during lighter sleep or REM, you are more likely to wake up feeling refreshed. There are a number of smartphone applications that are currently available that are able to sense when you are in these stages of sleep and wake you accordingly.

The times of day that you tend to feel the need to sleep or be awake are governed by an internal process called the circadian rhythm (our “body clock”). This can be altered by external factors, such as light and body temperature, but is generally reasonably stable under routine conditions:

For example, if you work regular 9-5 hours, you will generally start to feel sleepy around the same time each night before bed.

Jetlag can be a serious issue which is caused when your internal circadian rhythm does not match the time zone that you are in because of travel.

Our fatigue levels and therefore performance are particularly negatively effected during times when our bodies are telling us to be asleep.
How much sleep we’ve had and how good that sleep was can have serious ramifications on how we work, our productivity, and our safety.

If we are fatigued and have not had sufficient quality sleep, there can be major effects on a number of outcomes both at work and in our personal lives.

These can include;

- Slowed reaction time
- Failure to respond to changes in your environment (e.g. a traffic light)
- Poor judgment
- Difficulties with logic and problem solving skills
- Memory issues (both short- and long-term memory)
- Forgetfulness
- Decreased motivation
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Higher risk of accidents/injury particularly in the workplace
- Health effects (e.g. higher risk of gastrointestinal issues and obesity)
- Disrupted eating habits/changes in appetite
- Effects on mood
- Increased irritability
- Higher susceptibility to illness and associated increase in work absenteeism

These outcomes are possible even after small decreases in sleep time, but are even more prominent when sleep deprivation occurs frequently.