Every lifestyle choice has the potential to affect your cognitive abilities and health. In recent years, various researchers have found that a habit that most of us take for granted — sleep — may affect our memory in noticeable ways.

**Does sleep help long term memories stick?**
In a study published in the June 2011 issue of *Science*, University of Washington researchers studied the role of sleep in forming long-term memories by using a special breed of fruit flies that could be induced to sleep on demand. First, the male
flies studied in this paper were “trained” by being exposed to other, genetically engineered males who released female pheromones. After several courtships and rejections during this training period, some of these flies were then forced to sleep for 4 hours. These sleepers made no further attempts to court the engineered males when exposed to them again — suggesting that sleep had helped form a long-term memory of the earlier deception.

But flies who didn’t sleep were tricked once more by the same genetically engineered males. The researchers in this study concluded that training alone was not enough to trigger memory consolidation — sleep was a necessary component. While this study’s results don’t necessarily carry over to humans, they help cast the role of sleep in a new light.

**How lack of sleep could hurt you**

Not only may sleep help your memory, but lack of sleep may also hurt your health. A 2010 study from Biological Psychiatry found that chronic insomnia may lead to loss of brain volume. Researchers used fMRI scans to examine the brains of 37 human subjects with and without chronic insomnia. Insomniacs had a smaller volumes of gray matter in three brain areas — and the more serious the insomnia, the greater the loss of volume.

And in 2012, a preliminary study from the Washington University School of Medicine found that in mice, poor sleep may be related to brain plaques associated with Alzheimer’s.

**The future of sleep studies**

The third of our life that we spend sleeping has always been something of a mystery. Now a new wave of studies are finding indications that while we may appear to be in a stupor, our brains are actually hard at work. It may take many more years or decades before we reach definite conclusions about all the many roles that sleep plays, but most scientists agree that getting a decent night’s rest is a good idea.

Source: Lumosity
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