

An NFL Sleep Doctor's 7 Daytime Strategies For a Better Night's Rest

5 MIN READ

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BY GREG PRESTO

Cheri D. Mah, MD, helps NFL and NBA players perform better by sleeping better. Here's how you can use her daytime moves to rest better for your own Super Bowl moments.

When NFL stars return to the field for Week 1 of the new season, they'll be riding high on an adrenaline rush from the crowd, stuffed to the gills with **Uncrustables**, and almost all of them will be coming off a pregame nap.

But that extra snooze may be a problem, says Cheri D. Mah, MD, MS, a sleep physician and performance specialist who works with NFL teams like the Seattle Seahawks. Athletes across all sports love their naps, she says. And because they're more active, just like any Super Ager training for a big event, NFL stars might actually need more sleep than someone who *isn't* sweating through two-a-day workouts.

Mah wants her athletes to think about their daytime shuteye, and all of their sleep, differently. *Proactively*. She adds that anyone chasing longevity and performance would be wise to do the same.

"Sleep sometimes feels easy because we all do it, and it's accessible to us every day. So it tends not to be viewed in the same way as other interventions that can be performance-enhancing," she tells Super Age. "A lot of people are just reactive to their sleep. It's just the last thing that happens at the end of the day when everything else is done."

Just 15 Minutes More Sleep

Mah has been working with teams to help turn sleep from an afterthought into a competitive advantage for a decade, and has become a fixture across the NFL: She first worked with the San Francisco 49ers, and has since worked with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Denver Broncos, and with Philadelphia Eagles during their Super Bowl run, as well as with the Seahawks during their championship campaign last season.

“This is such a critical area that so many athletes underutilize, and it’s such a big advantage when you really make these small adjustments. An entire team can get better recovery day to day,” she says.

Mah notes that anyone can benefit from small changes. They don’t have to add up to hours of added sleep to make a difference.

“You may not be trying to get to the Super Bowl, but we all have our Super Bowl moments... the small things you can do to get 15 minutes more sleep, that’s the difference between an A student and a B student. Eleven minutes is the difference between a B student and a C student.”

That means you should be going beyond the advice we’ve all heard, like making your bedroom dark and cool. Mah says “sleep hygiene” behaviors like these can have a small effect, but how you behave the 15-16 hours you’re *not* in bed — a.k.a. what you do during the day — can make a bigger difference for what she calls “practicing quality sleep.” And they’re not always chemical or biohacking changes, but simple, easy-to-implement behaviors.

“There was one study, it was small, but it quantified that [writing a to-do list before bed] helped people fall asleep nine minutes faster,” the doctor says. “Melatonin has

only been shown to help you fall asleep seven to eight minutes faster when you look at the meta-analysis.”

These are the same types of strategies Mah uses with her pro athletes to improve recovery and on-field performance. Here are the seven NFL-tested sleep strategies she says can help Super Agers set themselves up for “a much more successful, productive, efficient, happier, healthier day tomorrow.”

The Sleep Doctor's 7 Daytime Prescriptions for Better Nights (and Tomorrows)

Most of us are suffering from a **sleep debt**, Mah says. This is basically the scientific way of saying you've slowly gotten behind on sleep over weeks, months, or even years. This debt can make you feel **sleepy during the day, impact your performance at work**, mess up your **hunger hormones**, increase your risks of **cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and obesity**, and even make your outlook on life **more negative**.

But you can “pay back” a sleep debt, and when you do, your mental performance improves. In a **study published in 2011**, Mah had Stanford basketball players extend their sleep for 5-7 weeks by aiming for more time in bed. When they did so, the hoopers improved their free throw success rate by 9 percent, and their three-point shots by 9.2 percent.

Mah wants her current athletes (and everyday Super Agers) to focus on more than just duration, though. By “thinking of sleep not as the end of today, but the beginning of tomorrow,” you can improve sleep quality and chip away at your sleep debt.

Sleep Strategy 1: When You Wake Up, Open Your Blinds.

Morning sunlight exposure doesn't just wake you up, Mah says. It can also impact how you sleep the next night.

In **a study published in October 2025**, scientists found that for every 30-minute increment spent in sunlight before 10 a.m., sleep quality was improved. Those morning rays also moved up the “midpoint of sleep.” This is the time that marks the intermediate point between when you fall asleep and wake up. And when it's earlier, sleep can be more restorative and synchronized with your circadian rhythms.

The Sleep Doctor's Prescription: When you wake up, try to see the sun for at least 30 minutes. Extra points if you can walk the dog or have coffee or breakfast outside, but you can even do this indoors, she says. Just open your blinds, and let the daylight shine in. Cloudy days count, too!

Sleep Strategy 2: Set Consistent Sleep and Wake Times.

Sleep duration and quality are important, but researchers are finding that when you go to bed and get up may mean more for your health. Consistent sleep schedules have been shown to **sharpen cognition**, **lower the risk of dementia**, support your **immune system** and help you **live longer**.

Keeping track of when you get up and go to bed, and how long it takes to fall asleep when you do, are great uses of consumer wearables, Mah says.

“They can be useful tools if used appropriately... that means looking at trends over days and months, not being fixated on daily scores,” she says.

The Sleep Doctor's Prescription: Build a ritual around your bedtime and wake time to help achieve a consistent sleep schedule.

Sleep Strategy 3: Be Consistent With Food and Drink, Too.

“Every cell in your body has a clock,” Mah says. “So when you eat, that can be a signal to your master clock.”

When you eat at the same times each day, you’re training your body’s clocks to know how long after eating you’re ready to go to sleep. When there’s wild variance in that eating schedule, your clock can get screwed up, Mah says.

Eating later can also impact your sleep, she adds, which is why you should try to have your last large meal of the day at least 2-3 hours before bed. If, like her NFL athletes, you need to have something closer to bedtime, have a light snack that combines protein and complex carbs: Mah suggests Greek yogurt with fruit, or 100 percent whole wheat crackers with peanut butter.

The Sleep Doctor’s Prescription: Schedule your daily meals consistently, and eat your last large meal no later than two hours before you plan to sleep.

Sleep Strategy 4: Stop Caffeine at 1 p.m., and All Fluids One Hour Before Bed.

Caffeine has a half-life of about six hours, Mah says. That means if you have some at 6 p.m., half of it’s still in your system at midnight.

But to avoid disrupting sleep, research shows that **caffeine should be stopped 8.8 hours before bedtime**. That’s why Mah suggests ceasing caffeine consumption at 1 p.m. for a 10 p.m. bedtime.

You can drink other fluids for longer, up to an hour before bed. Excessive fluid consumption before bed can mean you have to take more trips to the bathroom, but Mah says that one or two wake-ups per night are OK for a pee break if you can fall back asleep within 5-10 minutes.

The Sleep Doctor’s Prescription: No caffeine after 1 p.m. (or 9 hours before bedtime, whichever comes first), and no drinks at all within an hour of bed.

Sleep Strategy 5: Trade Long Naps For the “Nappuccino.”

Short naps of 20-30 minutes can recharge you, but longer naps can leave you feeling groggy. That’s because of sleep inertia, Mah says.

Also called “sleep drunkenness,” this hazy feeling of cognitive impairment can be triggered when you wake up from deeper stages of sleep, but not typically during shorter naps, Mah says. Waking up with sleep inertia basically sabotages the purpose of midday shuteye: To get some rest, and wake up refreshed.

Mah’s solution for her athletes is the “Nappuccino.” And it starts, paradoxically, with caffeine.

“Have your favorite caffeinated beverage, and the caffeine will start to kick in after about 15 minutes. So go take a 20-30 minute nap, and set an alarm so you actually wake up,” she says. If you’re able to fall asleep within about 10 minutes, which she says most people can, “then when you wake up, bam! Both the caffeine will have kicked in *and* you’ll enjoy the benefits of the power nap.”

The Sleep Doctor’s Prescription: If you need to nap, plan for a 20-30 minute session between 1 and 4 p.m. And if you need an extra jolt of energy when you wake up, use the Nappuccino technique.

Sleep Strategy 6: Create a Nightly Wind-Down Routine (Away From Your Bed).

Taking five minutes to write down what’s on the to-do list for tomorrow can help you fall asleep 9 minutes faster, according to a 2018 study. But some research suggests that it’s not necessarily the exact content of a pre-sleep routine that helps you fall asleep, but rather the routine itself.

By repeating the ritual night after night, you can train your body to associate these activities with sleep. Do the ritual, and sleep will follow. Your wind-down routine could include listening to relaxing music, meditating, turning off bright

lights, or putting on your sleeping clothes. Whatever you find relaxing that you can actually stick to.

To help with that association and training, Mah says, your wind-down routine should happen outside your bed. (The bed, she says, should be reserved for sleep and sex.) So perform your routine in a different spot, get sleepy, and then hit the hay.

The Sleep Doctor's Prescription: Create a wind-down routine that lasts at least five minutes, Mah says. In some studies, these routines take 30-45 minutes, but shorter ones will work, too. Just perform your routine somewhere other than in bed.

Sleep Strategy 7: Get Checked for Sleep Apnea

Research estimates that one in seven NFL players suffers from sleep apnea, but based on her experience with players, she expects the number's higher. In the general population, it definitely is: **The American Academy of Sleep Medicine** estimates that 26 percent of Americans aged 30 to 70 suffer from this disordered breathing during sleep. And it does more than just annoy the person you're sleeping with. Obstructive sleep apnea is associated with **a 43 percent increased risk** in developing a neurological disorder.

If your partner tells you that you consistently snore, stop breathing, or gasp while sleeping, ask your doctor about sleep apnea. You should also ask, Mah says, if you're a perimenopausal or menopausal woman who has had sudden or recent trouble sleeping, falling asleep, staying asleep, or if you wake up really early.

"It's a heightened period, because sleep becomes much more challenging," she says. Many women, though, go undiagnosed. "Don't struggle too long. Ask for help."

The Sleep Doctor's Prescription: Ask your partner about your sleep habits, consider tracking your midnight wakings with a wearable device, and follow up with your doctor if you suspect a problem.

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