

Napping Behaviors Predict Mortality Risk in Middle- to Older-Aged Adults

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

June 27, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Long daytime naps and inconsistent nap durations were linked to significantly higher risks of early death, regardless of nighttime sleep quality or baseline health status
- › People who regularly napped in the early afternoon or whose naps varied widely in length from day to day faced the greatest health risks, including cardiovascular and metabolic complications
- › Research shows that naps longer than 30 minutes are associated with increased risks of death, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer, while short naps under 30 minutes offer cognitive benefits
- › Among older women, daily napping raised the risk of all-cause mortality by 44%, and sleeping 10 or more hours per day raised death risk by 58%, even when other factors like illness and depression were accounted for
- › Consistent short naps are far less risky than irregular or long naps; if your daytime sleep varies a lot or exceeds 30 minutes, it could be a warning sign of underlying inflammation, energy imbalance or circadian rhythm disruption

Most people think of a daytime nap as a harmless indulgence or even a smart way to boost energy. But what if the timing and length of those naps were quietly revealing something much more serious? A growing body of research is challenging long-held assumptions about rest.

Instead of restoring your body, certain nap patterns signal biological stress, metabolic dysfunction, or an aging system struggling to maintain balance. And while you might not feel the damage in the moment, the consequences add up in ways that affect your long-term health and survival.

The truth is, not all naps are created equal. Short naps earlier in the day offer a mental reset, but longer or inconsistent naps have now been repeatedly linked to increased risk of chronic illness and premature death, especially in older adults. Even if your nighttime sleep seems fine, what you do during the day could be just as important.

Research reveals exactly how napping habits, especially their timing and variability, connect to your overall health and mortality risk. Let's take a closer look at what the latest science says and how to protect your energy, your rhythm, and your longevity.

Study Links Midday Naps and Nap Irregularity to Higher Death Risk

A study published in the journal *Sleep* evaluated the daytime sleep patterns of 86,565 middle-to-older-aged adults using wearable motion-detecting devices over a seven-day period.¹ The researchers, based at Massachusetts General Hospital, aimed to investigate how **nap length**, timing, and variability affected the risk of mortality. They focused on non-shift-working participants with an average age of 63 and used national registry data to track deaths over an 11-year follow-up.

- **Long naps and irregular nap patterns predicted higher death rates** — The key findings were clear: people who took longer naps, whose nap durations varied significantly from one day to the next, or who napped more frequently in the early afternoon had a higher risk of death from any cause. These patterns were not associated with improved health or recovery.

In fact, they appeared to signal underlying physiological imbalances or declining health that were not evident from nighttime sleep data alone.

- **Midday naps and inconsistent sleep behavior were particularly risky** — The breakdown of nap timing was revealing. Just 10% of naps occurred between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., but a much larger percentage, 41%, happened from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. People who consistently napped in this midday-to-afternoon window showed a higher likelihood of dying during the study follow-up period.²
- **Nap duration was less important than how much it varied day to day** — The study found that the inconsistency in nap length was a stronger predictor of mortality than the average amount of daytime sleep.

For example, someone who naps 25 minutes every day was less at risk than someone whose nap durations ranged from 10 minutes to 90 minutes across the week, even if both averaged the same total weekly nap time. That kind of irregularity reflects how well, or poorly, your body is managing its energy and recovery needs.

- **Naps longer than 30 minutes raised risk even when nighttime sleep was adequate** — Importantly, the increased mortality risk associated with longer naps and nap variability held up even after controlling for nighttime sleep quality and duration. In other words, the daytime nap behaviors added new predictive value that wasn't captured by looking at nighttime sleep alone.

The findings suggest that long or erratic naps serve as red flags for deeper biological stress or illness that hasn't yet been diagnosed.

- **The study raises important questions about hidden illness and circadian rhythm disruption** — While the study was not designed to identify what exactly causes the increased mortality risk, one explanation is that longer or inconsistent naps disrupt **circadian rhythms** — your body's internal clock that governs sleep, digestion, hormone release, and more.

If your internal rhythms are out of sync, it affects everything from energy to immune function. Alternatively, longer or erratic naps could be a response to underlying disease or inflammation that hasn't yet caused other obvious symptoms.

Naps Over 30 Minutes Linked to Higher Risk of Death and Disease

In similar research published in *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, researchers analyzed data from 44 cohort studies to evaluate how different nap lengths affect long-term health outcomes.³

These studies, which collectively involved hundreds of thousands of adults across multiple countries, focused on a range of health risks, specifically looking at death from any cause, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer. The researchers aimed to identify a threshold at which daytime napping stops being restorative and starts becoming harmful.

- **Longer naps raised serious health risks, while short naps were safer** — The review found a consistent pattern: naps longer than 30 minutes were associated with increased risks for all-cause mortality, cardiovascular events, metabolic disorders, and cancer.

In contrast, naps under 30 minutes did not show any harmful associations and were sometimes linked to reduced risks of cognitive decline and muscle loss. Longer naps could reflect or trigger underlying disruptions in circadian rhythms or energy metabolism.

- **There's a tipping point around 30 minutes** — The data showed what researchers call a “J-shaped” curve, meaning that both no naps and long naps were linked to worse outcomes, while short naps (especially those under 30 minutes) appeared neutral or even beneficial.

This pattern held across various populations and age groups. Essentially, once naps exceeded half an hour, the risk of dying or developing major diseases rose sharply, suggesting that **excessive daytime sleep** is a physiological warning sign, not just a habit of convenience.

Inconsistent Naps Signal Poorer Overall Health

A related study published in *Health Psychology* explored how the consistency of daytime napping, rather than the total nap time, related to the number of chronic health conditions in older adults.⁴ The goal was to determine whether daily variability in nap length reflects underlying health risks, especially in people who report frequent daytime sleep. Researchers used both objective sleep tracking and self-reports to evaluate daily nap behavior.

- **Participants with irregular nap durations had more health issues** — The study population included 103 older adults, all of whom were community-dwelling and had a range of diagnosed chronic conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis. Findings showed that people whose nap durations varied from one day to the next tended to have significantly more chronic illnesses than those with stable nap patterns.
- **Daytime sleep instability reflects internal dysregulation** — The study emphasized that inconsistent nap patterns are more than just a sleep habit; they could be a biological clue that your body is struggling to regulate energy or cope with ongoing inflammation. People whose naps varied wildly were more likely to have systemic problems affecting multiple organs and systems.
- **More variability in nap length equals greater disease load** — Researchers concluded that nap variability was not only a sign of sleep disruption, but also a practical, noninvasive indicator of total health status in older adults. If your naps swing from 15 minutes one day to over an hour the next, it's a red flag worth paying attention to, especially if you're already managing a chronic illness.

Daily Naps and Long Sleep Duration Linked to Higher Risk of Death in Older Women

A large-scale study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society examined the relationship between self-reported sleep habits and mortality risk in older women.⁵ The research drew on data from the Study of Osteoporotic Fractures and included 8,101 Caucasian women aged 69 and older. Over a seven-year follow-up, researchers analyzed how both daily napping and total 24-hour sleep duration influenced risk of death from all causes, including cardiovascular, cancer-related, and others.

- **Daily napping increased all-cause mortality by 44%** — Women who reported napping every day were 44% more likely to die from any cause compared to those who didn't nap daily. Cardiovascular mortality was 58% higher, and deaths from non-cardiovascular, noncancer causes were 59% more likely in daily nappers, even after adjusting for age, illness, depression, and other confounders.
- **Long sleepers faced even greater risk** — Women who reported sleeping nine to 10 hours per 24-hour period had a 28% higher risk of dying from all causes, while those sleeping 10 or more hours had a 58% increased risk. Cardiovascular mortality rose by 77%, and non-cardiovascular, noncancer deaths by 71%, in those sleeping 10 hours or more.

While the study did not pinpoint a single cause, long sleepers often had more medical issues, signs of depression, and poorer cognitive function. These factors are likely early signs of health decline that manifest subtly through sleep behavior before more obvious symptoms appear.

- **Short naps weren't linked to increased death rates** — Women who napped less than three hours per week did not show a higher risk of death, indicating that brief or infrequent naps don't carry the same risks.
- **The combination of daily naps and short night sleep was especially dangerous** — Among daily nappers, those sleeping fewer than six hours per night were 41% more likely to die compared to those sleeping six to eight hours nightly. Interestingly,

short nighttime sleep alone wasn't linked to increased risk, but when paired with daily naps, the risk rose significantly.

Train Your Brain and Body to Reduce Nap Dependence

If your naps are getting longer, more irregular or you feel sleepy during the day no matter how much you rest, it's a signal your body is out of sync. You're not broken, but your internal clock could be. The good news is that with the right habits, you can retrain your system, sharpen your energy cycles and restore a healthier balance between alertness and rest. The goal isn't to avoid all naps; it's to make your sleep more efficient and your energy more stable. Here are five ways to get started:

- 1. Wake up and go to bed at the same time every day, even on weekends —** Your circadian rhythm thrives on consistency. If your bedtime and wake time fluctuate, your brain struggles to know when to release [melatonin](#) and when to ramp up energy. The more stable your schedule is, the less your body will feel the urge to crash mid-afternoon. Pick a wake-up time that fits your life, anchor your morning with light and movement, and let everything else revolve around that.
- 2. Keep your daytime naps short and earlier in the day —** If you feel you truly need to nap, set a timer for 20 to 25 minutes, no more. Based on the data, anything over 30 minutes starts to increase your risk for chronic health issues and early death. Ideally, aim to nap before 2 p.m. so it doesn't interfere with your nighttime sleep. A short nap helps reset your brain, but a long one wrecks your body's internal rhythm.
- 3. Expose your eyes to bright natural light within an hour of waking —** Your brain uses light to regulate your internal clock, and [early daylight](#) is especially powerful. Getting outside, even on cloudy days, helps turn off melatonin production and tells your body it's time to be alert. The stronger your morning light exposure, the better your energy will hold throughout the day.

- 4. Eat your meals at regular times and avoid late-night snacking** — Just like your sleep, your digestion follows a **daily rhythm**. If you eat at odd hours or graze late at night, it throws off your circadian alignment and confuses your body's sleep-wake signals. Try to eat dinner at least three hours before bed and avoid anything after that. Your metabolism and your sleep both depend on this reset.
- 5. Move your body daily, especially in the morning or early afternoon** — Physical activity sends a strong message to your brain that it's time to be awake. If you're feeling drowsy during the day, the best solution isn't always sleep — it could be movement. A brisk walk, a short strength session, or even a few minutes of stretching will lift your energy and help realign your body's internal cues. If you're more sedentary, your brain gets mixed signals and starts defaulting to fatigue.

By locking in these habits, you're not just avoiding naps — you're building a lifestyle that supports lasting energy, healthier aging, and a sharper mind. Your body is capable of resetting. It just needs a clear signal from you.

FAQs About Napping

Q: What's the problem with long or inconsistent naps?

A: Research shows that naps longer than 30 minutes or those taken irregularly from day to day are linked to higher risks of death, chronic disease, and poor overall health, especially in older adults. These patterns reflect hidden health issues like poor circadian rhythm, disrupted nighttime sleep, or early signs of heart or brain dysfunction.

Q: Is it OK to nap at all?

A: Yes, short naps — ideally under 30 minutes and taken before 2 p.m. — are sometimes beneficial for alertness and memory. However, once a nap extends past 30 minutes, the risk of grogginess, sleep inertia, and longer-term health complications increases. Timing and duration are key.

Q: What does daytime sleepiness mean for my health?

A: Feeling sleepy during the day, especially if it happens often, has been linked to a higher risk of death, even in people who don't have obvious health problems. This kind of fatigue signals underlying conditions that need attention, such as cardiovascular issues, sleep disorders, or metabolic dysfunction.

Q: How do I know if my nap habits are unhealthy?

A: If your naps vary widely in length, frequently last longer than 30 minutes or you feel the need to nap every day just to function, those are warning signs. Studies show that people with irregular or long naps tend to have more chronic illnesses and a higher risk of premature death.

Q: How do I fix this and feel more energized?

A: Reset your internal clock by going to bed and waking up at the same time daily, limiting naps to 20 to 25 minutes, getting bright morning light exposure, eating meals on a regular schedule, and moving your body during the day. These simple habits help train your brain and body to maintain stable energy without needing long naps.

Sources and References

-
- ¹ Sleep, Volume 48, Issue Supplement_1, Page A152, May 19, 2025

- ² EurekaAlert! May 27, 2025
- ³ Sleep Medicine Reviews December 2024, Volume 78, 101989
- ⁴ Health Psychology 2012 Feb 27;31(5):671–676
- ⁵ Journal of the American Geriatrics Society 2009 Feb 10;57(4):604–611