

FIT FOR LIFE with Carol Westmorland

Mastering the important art of sleeping

I just love it; I feel fiercely territorial about it; and as the festive season is now upon us I will protect it warrior style.

I hear the government is proposing to teach the importance of it within the school curriculum. I couldn't agree more; without it we are a grumpy, disagreeable lot.

I would like to think I have mastered the art of sleep with aplomb.

Whilst I write this I can see my sister, with her two adorable three-year-olds wide eyed with wonderment, trying to recall her last good night's sleep.

The thing is, I am not without demands myself. Twenty or so classes a week coupled with cycling means my full quota is vital.

December and indulgence go hand in hand. December and discipline probably don't.

Sleep does not just improve our mood, it has very important benefits and scientists now agree that our bodies don't just go on 'stand by' they actively restore during our sleep.

Imagine being told that if you make sure you get some good quality sleep, ideally eight hours, you could be helping your waistline. It is not just diet and exercise that is important to our wellbeing but sleep too.

A 16-year study found that women who averaged less than five hours' sleep a night were found to be 32 per cent more likely to experience major weight gain (defined as 33lb or more).

It's thought this is because sleep helps regulate appetite-controlling hormones. Lack of sleep makes you hungry as it raises levels



of the hormone ghrelin whilst lowering levels of leptin, the appetite suppressant.

After a busy morning I like to keep three hours clear during the afternoon before heading off to my evening classes. During this time I can drop off easily for 20 minutes, in our sitting room, with a couple of fluffy kittens keeping my feet cosy. I love the restorative impact of sleep and the knowledge that my immunity is being boosted the more I get.

Our home is a traditional 18th century farmhouse with a pathway leading to our front door bordered by lavender.

As a consequence I love lavender and as a bath-girl I find its essence relaxing before bed. I also think it is important not to go to bed hungry even though for me that means eating relatively late. Our digestive juices are still being secreted while we sleep and as long as we are healthy our blood-sugar levels shouldn't fluctuate during the night. We are more likely to wake if we are hungry.

Currently we are marvelling at our clever new gadget, a birthday present to my husband.

It is a jug, just like a kettle, that heats and froths milk in less than a minute. So with my large mug of hot milk brimming with tryptophan, a clever little helper that the body needs to produce melatonin, a natural sleep enhancer, I am off to the peaceful land of nod. Goodnight.

Carol Westmorland lives in the Eden Valley. She is a Cycling Time Trials national champion, clocking up 445 miles in 24 hours. She also teaches pilates. www.pilates-cumbria.co.uk

LIFE COACH with Jo Hampson

Make allowances for the human chemistry set!

Hormones. Who needs 'em? Obviously, though I'm no doctor, we all do. They regulate many parts of our physical and emotional functioning.

Hormones, from the Greek word for 'impetus,' are vital chemical messengers released into the blood stream to keep complex functions perfectly balanced; growth, reproduction, cell renewal, fight and flight reactions.

There is no doubt that they have a part to play in falling in love, or that puberty can often create hormonal chaos.

It can be hard to understand at the time that emotions and mood swings can be, if not created, then at least influenced by this chemistry. Sometimes it is easier to recognise it in retrospect, for example when

lads and lasses ease out of a surly "Kevin" stage to emerge butterfly-like as well-balanced, fully functioning members of the human race.

Looking back I suspect my adolescent hormones clashed horribly with my mother's menopausal ones and a flashpoint, as with so many families was often, sadly, Christmas!

It's that traditional scene of several generations gathering for the festivities, adolescents wanting to do it all their own way; newlyweds in love and seeing only each-other and not the washing-up; emotional expectant or overjoyed new parents; menopausal grandparents knowing best and doing their best and imposing their best, and the older

generation surrounded by the chaos!

I am not suggesting anyone abdicates responsibility for their actions using chemistry as an excuse. But I am suggesting making allowances. If you find yourself or someone else suddenly and surprisingly tearful, aggressive or intolerant this Christmas, give yourself, or them, a break.

Step back, breathe deeply, and remind yourself that chances are everyone would prefer to enjoy Christmas. And it is possible!

Have a happy, peaceful, and well-balanced Christmas.



Jo Hampson and Georgina Perkins run life-change company Stepping Off, based in Shap