A wide variety of sleep trackers have hit the market

, with more being released all the time. Many are wearable trackers that you can strap to your wrist.

Others clip on your pillow or sit on your bedside table.

Features of these devices vary,

but some common capabilities include:

Sleep duration: By tracking the time you’re inactive

, the devices can record when

you fall asleep at night and when you stir in the morning.

Stage 1: Lasting only a few minutes, the first stage of sleep is light and easy to wake from.

Stage 2: During this stage, which is also fairly light, your brain waves begin to slow.

Stages 3 & 4: During these stages, you move into deeper sleep that’s harder to wake from. This is the time when your body grows and repairs itself and boosts immune function

Rapid eye movement (REM): During the final stage in the sleep cycle,

your brain becomes more active and dreams occur. Your brain is processing information and storing long-term memories.

# Not getting enough sleep also makes you more likely to get a host of illnesses, including [obesity](https://www.webmd.com/diet/obesity/features/am-i-obese), [type 2 diabetes](https://www.webmd.com/diabetes/type-2-diabetes), [high blood pressure](https://www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/default.htm), [heart](https://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/default.htm) [disease](https://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/default.htm) and [stroke](https://www.webmd.com/stroke/default.htm), and [depression](https://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm) and other mental illnesses.

While sleep trackers can collect a lot of information about your slumber habits, they don’t measure sleep directly.

Instead, they often measure inactivity as a surrogate for

estimating sleep. Most sleep tracking devices make some guesstimate as to how much you’re actually sleeping.

For exact data about your sleep habits, you’d have to do a

medical sleep study, which monitors brain waves to analyze the stages of sleep you cycle through during the night.

Still, tracking devices can definitely be useful for helping you recognize patterns in your sleep habits. Do you feel sluggish when you sleep from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. but energetic if you shift your shuteye to 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.? Do you sleep better when your bedroom is cooler or on days you exercise? Is your sleep disrupted if you have caffeine after lunchtime?

The tracker will give you something to reflect on, often with user- friendly graphs or reports that make it easy to spot trends.

If you have any concerns about the quality of your sleep, it’s a good idea to talk to a health practitioner. If you’re an otherwise healthy person who just wants to gain some insight into your sleep routine , tracking devices might be a good option. Just take the numbers with a grain of salt.

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It seems like everyone is struggling to get more and better sleep these days. The National Sleep Foundation’s 2020 Sleep in America Poll found that nearly half of all Americans (44%) feel sleepy 2-4 days a week, and 28% feel sleepy 5-7 days a week.

Forty percent of adults say feeling sleepy at least

occasionally interferes with their daily activities.

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Your heart rate and variations in it Your breathing patterns

Time awake and time sleeping Snoring

Body temperature

Room temperature and humidity Light and noise levels

# So can a sleep tracking device like the Fitbit, Apple Watch, Withings Sleep, or Biostrap EVO help you find out how much sleep you’re getting pinpoint where you’re having trouble and what may be interrupting your sleep, and ultimately get a good solid night of ZZZs?

The answer seems to be yes: New research in the journal Sleep suggests that these sleep tracking devices perform about as well at tracking cycles of sleeping and waking as more advanced laboratory-based sleep monitors.

**Types of Trackers**

**What kinds of sleep trackers are available, and what do they offer? There are two main categories of sleep tracking devices: wearables and non-wearables. Wearables can take the form of a watch or bracelet, ring, chest strap, or even a mask or headband design, while non-wearables are typically thin devices that you slide under your sheet or mattress, or place next to your bed. There are even smart mattresses that can monitor your sleep habits.**

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Most trackers take all this data and put it together into reports that you can view the next morning and monitor over time, to see how your sleep patterns change and what might be affecting them. Some have “sleep coach” functions that give you feedback based on the patterns they detect. Many also have tools that let you establish and work toward goals for your sleep and set smart alarms to wake you when you are in your lightest phase of sleep.

If you have any concerns about the quality of your sleep, it’s a good idea to talk to a health practitioner. If you’re an otherwise healthy person who just wants to gain some insight into your sleep routine , tracking devices might be a good option. Just take the numbers with a grain of salt.

Do you want a device you can wear and check regularly, and perhaps something that integrates with your other health data, like physical activity?

Then consider a wearable like a smartwatch or wristband. But if you find something like that intrusive to have on all the time (or even just when you sleep), you might look at a non-wearable.

What’s your budget? The prices for most sleep trackers range from about $30 to $600. “Smart mattresses” that track your sleep, as well as offering a variety of “comfort” technologies aimed at improving your sleep, typically start north of $600 and can cost $5,000 or more.

How much information do you want? Some sleep trackers just monitor your vital signs, like heart rate, respiration, and movement, while others also monitor the environment around you, including things like noise, temperature, and humidity.

How can you use the information? If you want to share data with your doctor or another health professional, consider what can be done with the device’s reports. Many of the associated apps can generate printable PDFs to take to a doctor’s appointment, or online charts and graphs you can send via email.

Sleep trackers are useful and their technology is getting better all the time, but they can’t substitute for the advice of your doctor. If you’re just feeling like you aren’t getting enough sleep and want to figure out what might be interrupting your peaceful night’s rest, a sleep tracker is a great tool to help you do that.

But if you have more significant issues, such as sleep apnea or chronic insomnia, don’t rely on the sleep tracker alone. Instead, take the information you get from the device to your doctor to discuss interventions that might help you. Data from your sleep tracker can’t be used to diagnose a sleep disorder. The devices aren’t approved by the FDA for that purpose. But the information from them can help point your doctor toward next steps in diagnosing what might be keeping you from getting a good night’s sleep.

If you use a Fitbit Alta HR, Fitbit Charge 3, Fitbit Versa, Fitbit Ionic, or Charge 4, your sleep data may soon be able to reveal why. By tapping into your nighttime heart rate and movement patterns, these devices will be able to estimate how much time you spend in light, deep, and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Pretty cool, right? Each of these stages—or sleep types—serve a different purpose, so understanding how much of each stage you log can help you identify and address sleep-related issues. Below, a breakdown of what you need to know about each sleep stage.

Sleep Stages, Simplified

Sleep researchers divide sleep into five stages—stages 1, 2, 3, and REM—but to keep things simple, Fitbit groups like sleep stages together. In the app, your sleep will fall into three stages: light, deep, and REM. Here’s what each of those mean.

LIGHT SLEEP

Stage 1: “This is the sleep that’s a little more choppy, shallow, not restful,” says Michael Grandner, MD, director of the Sleep and Health Research Program at the University of Arizona in Tucson and a Fitbit sleep consultant. “But it’s usually just a quick transition, so you’re not in it for very long.

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During stage one, “you’re still hearing things and have a sense of awareness,” says Fitbit sleep consultant Allison Siebern, PhD, consulting assistant professor at The Stanford Center for Sleep Sciences and Medicine and director of Sleep Health Integrative Program at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Fayetteville, NC. “Your brain has dipped into sleep but you don’t feel like you’re asleep.”

DEEP SLEEP

Stage 3: During deep sleep, you become less responsive to outside stimuli.

Breathing slows and muscles relax; heart rate usually becomes more regular. “Deep sleep is very much about the body,” says Grandner. “The thinking parts of the brain are largely offline. Your muscles are very relaxed. You’re not dreaming at all

REM

“If deep sleep is about body, REM is about the brain,” says Grandner. “The brain is very active during REM sleep, yet the body is very inactive. Actually it’s so inactive, you’re actively paralyzed during REM sleep.”

REM is when most dreaming happens and your eyes move rapidly in different directions (hence the name). Heart rate increases and your breathing becomes more irregular.

Stage 2: When people talk about light sleep, this is the stage they’re usually referring to. You’re asleep but can be easily awoken. That said, stage 2 sleep is not shallow, nor is it less important than other sleep stages. “Light sleep is very important because it takes up more than half of the night,” says Grandner. “It’s when your body processes memories and emotions and your metabolism regulates itself. So there’s a lot of body maintenance occurring during lighter stages of sleep.” Breathing and heart rate typically decrease slightly during this stage.

Understanding Sleep Cycles

Your body doesn’t just hit each sleep stage once a night, nor does it spend an equal amount of time in each of them. In fact, it cycles through all of these stages multiple times a night. “Each cycle lasts, on average, 90 minutes,” says Grandner, “but some cycles can be as short as 50 minutes and some can be as long as 100 minutes or more.” Here, according to Grandner, is how it works:

Cycle 1: During light sleep you’ll dip into stage one and transition into stage two. Then you’ll move quickly into deep sleep, where you’ll stay for a while before going into 10 minutes or so of REM. “It’s very hard to wake up from deep sleep, which is why your body tries to get it over with as quickly as possible,” says Grandner. “By the time the night’s halfway over, you’re done with it.”

How Do Your Sleep Stages Stack Up?

When you click on the sleep tile from your Fitbit dashboard and then choose Today, you’ll be able to see how much time you spent in each sleep stage and what percent of your total night’s sleep that stage constituted.

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On average, light sleep will take up about 50 to 60 percent or more of your night. “Whether you get more or less light sleep isn’t really going to affect how you feel too much, because it’s just whatever time is left that’s not spent in deep sleep or REM,” says Grandner. “It’s sort of the remainder.”

Lastly, REM makes up about 20 to 25 percent of your nightly sleep and mostly takes place in the second half of the night. “If you cut your sleep short, most of what you’re cutting out is REM,” says Grandner. “And too little REM sleep can leave you feeling groggy, less able to focus, and might lead to memory problems.” That’s why it’s important to get enough rest after learning something new or before taking an exam. Many medications can also block REM. “Most antidepressants can cut REM sleep by half,” says Grandner.