

Sleep or Swim? The Early Morning Dilemma of Every Swimmer

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Introduction

I've trained consistently since I was 10 years of age. At age 58 I still struggle at times with the dilemma of waking up at 5am and thinking **will I train or will I sleep?** Sometimes I roll over and try to go back to sleep (especially on those cold winter mornings!) because I'm so tired. However, it's usually **train** that wins out as that little **voice in my head seems to get louder and louder if I try to go back to sleep!** *Get up and train* it shouts! Here is some research from my own Central Queensland University and the Australian Institute of Sport that highlights how little sleep even elite swimmers get, especially before early morning swim sessions.

The Research

A squad of seven **elite swimmers** from the Australian Institute of Sport participated in the study during 14 days of high-intensity training in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games. During these 14 days, participants had 12 training days, each starting with a session at 6am, and 2 rest days. For each day, the **amount of sleep** obtained by participants was determined using self-report sleep diaries and wrist-worn activity monitors.

The Results

On **nights before the early morning training** days, the swimmers went to bed at about 10pm and got up 10-15 minutes before training. Interestingly, they only got **5.4 ± 1.3 hours sleep** on those nights. On **nights before rest days** the swimmers went to bed at around 12.30am and got up about 9.45am, getting **7.1 ± 1.2 hours sleep**. Statistical analysis showed that that on nights prior to training days, bedtimes and get-up times were significantly earlier, time spent in bed was significantly shorter, and the amount of sleep obtained was significantly less, than on nights prior to rest days.

So What?

Good sleep is essential for optimal performance, with less than 6 hours a night disturbing our ability to think and concentrate, upsetting glucose metabolism, compromising our immune system, and even being linked to heart disease in older people. In athletes of any age, sleep has consistently been shown to be essential for recovery and preparation for quality training sessions. The results of this study indicate that early-morning training sessions severely restrict the amount of sleep obtained by elite athletes. Given that chronic sleep restriction of less than 6 hours a night per night can impair psychological and physiological functioning, it is possible that early-morning schedules actually limit the effectiveness of training, suggesting that later morning swim sessions may be the best way to go if you can manage it with work and family. At the risk of pushing my book *The Masters Athlete* too hard, [Chapter 15 \(Recovery Strategies for Masters Athletes\)](#) has some excellent tips on improving both sleep quality and quantity in masters athletes.

Source: Sargent, C. and others (2014). Sleep or swim? Early-morning training severely restricts the amount of sleep obtained by elite swimmers. European Journal of Sports Science, 14(Suppl. 1): S310-S315.