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OPINION

Rethinking Sleep

By DAVID K. RANDALL

Published: September 22, 2012 | 185 Comments

SOMETIME in the dark stretch of the night it happens. Perhaps it's the chime of an incoming text message. Or your iPhone screen lights up to alert you to a new e-mail. Or you find yourself staring at the ceiling, replaying the day in your head. Next thing you know, you're out of bed and engaged with the world, once again ignoring the often quoted fact that eight straight hours of sleep is essential.

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Sound familiar? You're not alone. Thanks in part to technology and its constant pinging and chiming, roughly 41 million people in the United States — nearly a third of all working adults — get six hours or fewer of sleep a night, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And sleep deprivation is an affliction that crosses economic lines. About 42 percent of workers in the mining industry are sleep-deprived, while about 27 percent of financial or insurance industry workers share the same complaint.

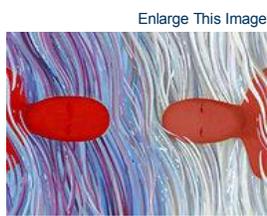


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Times Topic: Sleep



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Typically, mention of our ever increasing [sleeplessness](#) is followed by calls for earlier bedtimes and a longer night's sleep. But this directive may be part of the problem. Rather than helping us to get more rest, the tyranny of the eight-hour block reinforces a narrow conception of sleep and how we should approach it. Some of the time we spend tossing and turning may even result from misconceptions about sleep and our bodily needs: in fact neither our bodies nor our brains are built for the roughly one-third of our lives that we spend in bed.

The idea that we should sleep in eight-hour chunks is relatively recent. The world's population sleeps in various and surprising ways. Millions of Chinese workers

continue to put their heads on their desks for a nap of an hour or so after lunch, for example, and daytime napping is common from India to Spain.

One of the first signs that the emphasis on a straight eight-hour sleep had outlived its usefulness arose in the early 1990s, thanks to a history professor at Virginia Tech named A. Roger Ekirch, who spent hours investigating the history of the night and began to notice strange references to sleep. A character in the "Canterbury Tales," for instance, decides to go back to bed after her "first sleep." A doctor in England wrote that the time between the "first sleep" and the "second sleep" was the best time for study and reflection. And one 16th-century French physician concluded that laborers were able to conceive more children because they waited until after their "first sleep" to make love. Professor Ekirch soon learned that he wasn't the only one who was on to the historical existence of alternate sleep cycles. In a fluke of history, Thomas A. Wehr, a psychiatrist then working at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Md.,

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was conducting an experiment in which subjects were deprived of artificial light. Without the illumination and distraction from light bulbs, televisions or computers, the subjects slept through the night, at least at first. But, after a while, Dr. Wehr noticed that subjects began to wake up a little after midnight, lie awake for a couple of hours, and then drift back to sleep again, in the same pattern of segmented sleep that Professor Ekirch saw referenced in historical records and early works of literature.

It seemed that, given a chance to be free of modern life, the body would naturally settle into a split sleep schedule. Subjects grew to like experiencing nighttime in a new way. Once they broke their conception of what form sleep should come in, they looked forward to the time in the middle of the night as a chance for deep thinking of all kinds, whether in the form of self-reflection, getting a jump on the next day or amorous activity. Most of us, however, do not treat middle-of-the-night awakenings as a sign of a normal, functioning brain.

Doctors who peddle sleep aid products and call for more sleep may unintentionally reinforce the idea that there is something wrong or off-kilter about interrupted sleep cycles. Sleep anxiety is a common result: we know we should be getting a good night's rest but imagine we are doing something wrong if we awaken in the middle of the night. Related worries turn many of us into insomniacs and incite many to reach for sleeping pills or sleep aids, which reinforces a cycle that the Harvard psychologist Daniel M. Wegner has called "the ironic processes of mental control."

As we lie in our beds thinking about the sleep we're not getting, we diminish the chances of enjoying a peaceful night's rest.

This, despite the fact that a number of recent studies suggest that any deep sleep — whether in an eight-hour block or a 30-minute nap — primes our brains to function at a higher level, letting us come up with better ideas, find solutions to puzzles more quickly, identify patterns faster and recall information more accurately. In a NASA-financed study, for example, a team of researchers led by David F. Dinges, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, found that letting subjects nap for as little as 24 minutes improved their cognitive performance.

In another study conducted by Simon Durrant, a professor at the University of Lincoln, in England, the amount of time a subject spent in deep sleep during a nap predicted his or her later performance at recalling a short burst of melodic tones. And researchers at the City University of New York found that short naps helped subjects identify more literal and figurative connections between objects than those who simply stayed awake.

Robert Stickgold, a professor of [psychiatry](#) at Harvard Medical School, proposes that sleep — including short naps that include deep sleep — offers our brains the chance to decide what new information to keep and what to toss. That could be one reason our dreams are laden with strange plots and characters, a result of the brain's trying to find connections between what it's recently learned and what is stored in our long-term [memory](#). Rapid eye movement sleep — so named because researchers who discovered this sleep stage were astonished to see the fluttering eyelids of sleeping subjects — is the only phase of sleep during which the brain is as active as it is when we are fully conscious, and seems to offer our brains the best chance to come up with new ideas and hone recently acquired skills. When we awaken, our minds are often better able to make connections that were hidden in the jumble of information.

Gradual acceptance of the notion that sequential sleep hours are not essential for high-level job performance has led to increased workplace tolerance for napping and other alternate daily schedules.

Employees at Google, for instance, are offered the chance to nap at work because the company believes it may increase productivity. Thomas Balkin, the head of the department of behavioral biology at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, imagines a near future in which military commanders can know how much total sleep an individual soldier has had over a 24-hour time frame thanks to wristwatch-size sleep monitors. After consulting computer models that predict how decision-making abilities

decline with fatigue, a soldier could then be ordered to take a nap to prepare for an approaching mission. The cognitive benefit of a nap could last anywhere from one to three hours, depending on what stage of sleep a person reaches before awakening.

Most of us are not fortunate enough to work in office environments that permit, much less smile upon, on-the-job napping. But there are increasing suggestions that greater tolerance for altered sleep schedules might be in our collective interest. Researchers have observed, for example, that long-haul pilots who sleep during flights perform better when maneuvering aircraft through the critical stages of descent and landing.

Several Major League Baseball teams have adapted to the demands of a long season by changing their sleep patterns. Fernando Montes, the former strength and conditioning coach for the Texas Rangers, counseled his players to fall asleep with the curtains in their hotel rooms open so that they would naturally wake up at sunrise no matter what time zone they were in — even if it meant cutting into an eight-hour sleeping block. Once they arrived at the ballpark, Montes would set up a quiet area where they could sleep before the game. Players said that, thanks to this schedule, they felt great both physically and mentally over the long haul.

Strategic napping in the Rangers style could benefit us all. No one argues that sleep is not essential. But freeing ourselves from needlessly rigid and quite possibly outdated ideas about what constitutes a good night's sleep might help put many of us to rest, in a healthy and productive, if not eight-hour long, block.

David K. Randall is a senior reporter at Reuters and the [author](#) of "Dreamland: Adventures in the Strange Science of Sleep."

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on September 23, 2012, on page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Rethinking Sleep.

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185 Comments

Readers shared their thoughts on this article.

ALL	READER PICKS	NYT PICKS	Newest	Comments Closed
	Elizabeth	San Francisco		
<p>As a new mom of a two month old that sleeps for one 5-6 hour chunk followed by a 30-45 min alert period and another 2-3 hour sleep, I feel surprisingly rested in the morning. So this idea of split sleep really resonates with me!</p> <p>Sept. 23, 2012 at 11:50 p.m. RECOMMEND 21</p>				
	Jon D.	NM		
<p>At the community college where I work, we recently became the ONLY school in the entire U.S. to lose its existing accreditation FOR ITS NURSING PROGRAM during the 2011-2012 academic year.</p> <p>The main problem is that the administrators at all levels wage an incessant war against the instructors (don't ask me why; it makes absolutely no sense to me either).</p> <p>And even now when we need everyone to work FOR the college more than ever, the war against the instructors continues.</p> <p>Sept. 23, 2012 at 11:50 p.m. RECOMMEND 5</p>				
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Sept. 23, 2012 at 2:52 p.m. RECOMMEND 13



SMiller Southern US

A couple of years ago our power was out for five days as a result of tornados in North Alabama. No lights, no computer, no cellphone service, no television (not a single luxury!). During those days I got the best sleep I have had since I was a child. We fell asleep when it got dark and woke up before it was light, and felt luxuriously rested. This is just an anecdote from which I can draw no scientific inferences.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 2:47 p.m. RECOMMEND 161



RoughAcres New York

The anxiety about "getting to work on time" drove me crazy - and kept me from sleep or made me oversleep - until I removed myself from that artificial schedule.

Now I find I sleep less but more frequently, and get a LOT more done.

Throw away the timeclocks and regimented demand of "work hours" by employers, and we'd all be more rested and more productive.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 2:00 p.m. RECOMMEND 64



IICorago Philadelphia

The "sleep a few hours-wake a few hours-sleep a few hours" routine has only hit me since I turned 60. While I'm up from 2 am to 6 am, I jot down ideas, pay bills online, read, or answer email correspondence. I am fine the next day. I hear the same story from many of my friends. I wondered why Mr. Randall made no mention of the effects of aging on sleep cycles.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 55



M.G. Piety Philadelphia

There are so many problems with this article it is hard to know where to begin in pointing them out. First, we are not told what the "firste sleep" and "second sleep" of Chaucer, et al. refer to. It is quite possible that one refers to something like a conventional eight-hour sleep through the night and that the other refers to a mid-morning or mid-afternoon nap. So it is entirely possible that people used to get MORE than eight hours of sleep a day rather than less. Also, the efficacy of naps is not directly linked to how much people are sleeping otherwise. An exhausted person suffering from chronic sleep deprivation will more than likely think better after he/she has had a nap than before. The same may also be true, however, of someone who has gotten eight hours, or more of uninterrupted sleep. Basically, this article offers no evidence whatever to support the inference that we don't need eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. It suggests, in fact, only that we appear to function better the more sleep we get.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 51



Nigel Berkeley, CA

So where do the insane schedules worked by hospital staff fit into all this? What is the efficiency of an emergency room doctor during his 36th straight hour? And, more importantly, when are hospitals going to wake up (no pun intended) and change their schedules?

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 112



cincobayou fort walton beach

Great question! Would like to see a few answers to this.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 2:47 p.m. RECOMMEND 14



DeathbyInches Arkansas

Sleep has always been my enemy. For as far back as I can remember I hated to go to sleep. I recall the endless nights of my childhood, laying in bed in the dark totally awake and bored out of my mind. Of course my imagination ran wild in that dark room as I thought about whatever 7 or 8 year old boys think about in the dark.

There was a time during puberty that dreams were my friends. But the older I became and the more I experienced the unpleasantness of adult life my dreams turned on me. During the years I drank too much I rarely remembered dreams upon waking. During a period of depression following the loss of my first wife I developed reoccurring nightmares. Giant maggots would come out of the walls. I'd find scooped-out cat heads on my elbows

and knees. One morning I found myself 40 feet out in my front yard crawling naked, trying to escape the white maggots. I got professional help and things got better.

I've only ever gotten about 6 hours sleep per night and if that has harmed me, I can't tell it. In my 30s I decided it was pretty dumb to spend all day awake and on guard and then lay down and become unconscious & totally vulnerable for hours at a time. If modern life is so scary, how do we open the gates, let down the fences for hours each night? The bad guys know everyone goes to sleep at night. Why not rob & rape then?

I lead a normal life despite my lifelong messed up sleep, but my dreams tell me I'm Charles Manson when I'm unconscious...yikes!

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 6



Mickey Pittsburgh

When I entered college as a freshman years ago, they told us that we would learn many things besides the content of the courses. And sure enough, in 8:30 AM chemistry lecture, I learned the knack of falling asleep anywhere, any time. This skill has served me well in adult life and I heartily recommend it.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 51



polymath British Columbia

Very interesting.

I'd like to know a lot more about how people in other cultures sleep -- especially those cultures that are relatively unaffected by modern civilization. That should be a strong clue as to what is natural, what kind of sleep humans evolved to have.

It's well-known that light impinging on the retina, even through closed eyelids, can be a major influence on how long we sleep. So it seems likely that modern artificial lighting plays a significant role in disrupting our natural sleep patterns.

What is natural for us, of course, probably depends on a number of factors including our individual genetic heritage, the length of daylight, and the weather.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 12



David Chowes New York City

(The late) Buckminster Fuller, the great inventor and 'thinker outside the box' and creator of the geodomic (sp?) dome commented that he slept for one hour each six hours. The total was four hours per day. And, he said he felt well rested and was active for 20 rather than 16 hours daily.

He lived to a ripe old age.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 16



Rob L777 Conway, SC

I get impatient with these well-meaning opinion pieces when they attempt to clarify a complex subject matter, then perpetrate new misinformation in place of the old conventional wisdom.

Mr. Randall you lost me after you wrote this: "Some of the time we spend tossing and turning may even result from misconceptions about sleep and our bodily needs: in fact neither our bodies nor our brains are built for the roughly one-third of our lives that we spend in bed."

This is simply nonsense. You apparently believe that today's scientists, and you, by extension, know how to design a body and mind that sleep better than the bodies and minds we have now, which were arrived at after hundreds of thousands of years of genetic evolution. These scientists don't even know what sleep is for, and neither do you. It serves multiple functions, the deepest of which we do not understand. How come a person will first go insane, then die after repeated, long-term sleep deprivation? We don't know the answer to this simple question.

As for the social parameters around getting a decent sleep, most humans simply can't afford the luxury of sleeping whenever and wherever we want to. This was true before the Industrial Revolution when farmers and their helpers had to harvest crops when they were ripe, and it was even more

true when workers were turned into machine operators and attendants for factories running at top speed. For ordinary people, this truth will not change, Ambien be damned.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 28

Charlotte K Massachusetts

Sounds like another scheme to make us work longer hours and cram more into every day!

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 14

bencharif Staten Island, NY

Since my 30s, I've not gotten more than about six hours. Sometimes a little less, sometimes a little more. I've never felt sleep-deprived or guilty about the fact that I don't rack up eight hours a night. I like to sleep, but I like being awake more.

During my time as a wage slave, I got the six hours I seemed to need, 12 midnight to 6 a.m., mostly, with only minimal interruptions. Almost as soon as I retired, my body asserted its own sleep requirements pretty quickly, and two patterns emerged. Pattern No. 1 is the more frequent.

1. Turn in at 10 p.m., awake at 2 or 3, stay up till about 5 or 6, and start the day at 8 or 9.
2. Fall asleep at around 2-3 a.m. and start the day at 8 or 9.

I count myself fortunate to be able to fall asleep quickly. If I feel inclined to nap during the day, I don't hesitate. Naps seem to have minimal effect on the patterns described above.

I'm pretty satisfied with my sleep situation overall.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 4

Chris Gable charlottesville, VA

When this article is linked, the sub-title reads "It's not the quantity of sleep that restores and refreshes, but the quality". This is inaccurate. Dr. Wehr's study observed participants still sleeping 8 hours a night, however these 8 hours were separated into a 5 hour "first sleep" block and a 3 hour "second sleep" block. This suggests that adequate sleep is dependent on both quality and quantity.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 8

Daniel F. Kripke, M.D. San Diego, CA

Most people do not need 8 hours sleep. Data from millions of people studied by the American Cancer Society and others show that people who say they usually sleep about 7 hours live the longest. In Japan, optimal survival is associated with sleeping 5 to 7 hours. Since brain-wave-recorded sleep tends to be about 1 hour less, optimal survival is seen in 5-6.5 hours sleep, so far as we can estimate.

Therefore, if you are not too sleepy in the day, do not worry about sleeping only 5 or 6 hours at night. One of the main causes of insomnia is lying in bed for 8 hours when you really only need to be in bed for perhaps 6 or 7 hours.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 11

Mac TN

My guess is that sleep needs differ from person to person. I never sleep straight through the night, and always feel the need to sleep come early afternoon. Maybe if I slept when my body wanted to, I'd get a good 4-6 hours at night, and another solid couple of hours in the afternoon, and then perhaps I wouldn't be going around tired all the time.

I'd be interested to see how productive and successful a company might be if they structured the work day based upon the sleep needs of their employees. I'm pretty worthless for about a quarter of the day when forced to sit at a desk while my body wants to sleep.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:43 p.m. RECOMMEND 11

MrsTiggyWinkle Bos

I'm not sure what the point of this article is, other than to advertise the book. Is he saying that, if your work prevents you from getting 8 hours of

sleep straight, that should be ok, as long as you can make it up with a nap later? That kind of job probably doesn't allow for a nap. It's true that there are different ways to achieve sleep, based on culture and individual physiology. It's nice that some people can sleep fewer than 8 hours, or in an interrupted fashion, or have a short nap, and feel revived and productive. It's nice that they are pleased with themselves. Those of us who suffer from sleep problems know that there is no simple answer to insomnia. To butcher Tolstoy "All happy [sleepers] are alike; each unhappy [sleeper] is unhappy in its own way."

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 9



John F. Atlanta

The 8 hour of sleep argument is quite antiquated. Randall never mentions other studies such as the REM cycle of sleeping in multiples of 90 minute cycles.

I don't always get "8 hours of sleep" but 7.5 and 6 me more good than sleeping in 8 or 10 during the weekends.

Great reads on the 90 minute sleep cycles

<http://helpguide.org/life/sleeping.htm#cycle>
<http://findmymotivation.com/2012/09/22/sleep/>
<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/lifehack/90-minutes-sleep-cycle.html>

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 1



Scott New York

Let's be honest - anyone who is working in the corporate world today is expected not to need sleep at all. It's a weakness. Get off the redeye, drive 3 hours and get straight to the office - that's the expectation. Need something done after a meeting that started at 1530 and ended at 2000 (3:30 and 8pm), having skipped dinner - get back to your desk and get it done, then be ready for that call at 7:30 tomorrow morning. And when do we get that reset? On the weekends that we work through or during the vacations, maybe a week if you're lucky, when you're tied to your blackberry all day long? Like most other things, we brilliant humans have mucked up the information age just as we have our environment.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 28



lizzie avignon france

I love this article; this eight hour orthodoxy had all the family feeling sick in some way - neither of us had the same sleep pattern! Those who took a nap were considered as a cases of laziness and severely reproved. If this notion gets publicity, that of personal schedules, perhaps the need for pills will diminish dramatically. France has a reputation of being one of the world's worst consumer.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 2



Robert Austin, Texas

So, the masters of the world may permit us naps again, if it's proven there's a buck in it for them. That is how enlightenment works these days?

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 12



Adam New York

This article is interesting, but weirdly confused about what it's advocating: is it a call for more naps, or is it a call for a return to two-sleep nights?

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 6



ellen L.A., CA

This has been my favorite way to sleep for quite a while. I sleep for a few hours, wake up for an hour or two and then back for my second sleep. It works great!

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 3



nlinime san diego

This concept has been recently written about. The reality is that a split sleep is biologic and natural for the body. We worry and obsess because to accept this natural phenomena conflicts with our present day necessities. We have to get up at zero dark thirty to go to work, so a split sleep is difficult. If we could go to bed when tired, wake up in the middle of the night and just

think, write, read whatever, we will eventually go back to sleep but anxiety over having to get up in a few hours sets in- thus efforts to extinguish this natural occurrence with sleep aids, still likely to be sleep deprived. The evolutionary biology of this 2 part sleep cycle involved going to sleep as light disappeared, clearly exhausted from a day of hard work and long travel. Waking was expected and some theorize was to evaluate dreams as mythology was very big in those days. I am fortunate in that many days I can follow my own cycle, going to sleep at 8 or when I feel tired, often waking anywhere between midnight and 3 am. Frequently I just get up, read or whatever, sometimes interesting dreams to contemplate. I then go back to sleep- when I am tired and sleep again until I wake up- whatever time it is. Its a wonderful experience.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 3



Michael N.E. CT

"Eat when hungry; sleep when tired", Zen Masters tell us.

'10 pm to 3 am, then 5 am to 9 am' or '4 am to noon' are the two cycles I fall into naturally given over a month of sleeping whenever I want, with no daily routines dictating when I must be awake or asleep. I used to think it was 'just me', but have realized that many people have very similar experiences. The key, of course, is the lack of any routine and that is extremely rare.

The second-most prominent sleep pattern of my life has to do with lack of sleep and all-nighters. I regularly went 2 or more days without sleep during College and Graduate School and then doing transactional work requiring all-out efforts for days at a time. Not just performance and capacity follow a predictable pattern, but so does the opposite - that kind of whacky state of mind that accompanies sleep deprivation when you feel like you've taken some chemical or drug that alters perception. Often you feel more detached and can have conversations with others while also having one with yourself or thinking about several different things at once.

Though everyone seems to have their own take on this, there are many similarities across the board.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 2

Barry Reitman Blooming Grove, NY

I discovered power-naps when supervising nuclear construction at General Dynamics' Electric Boat submarine facility on the midnight shift. I used the 25-minute "lunch break" to re-charge.

Now, as a public speaker on the topic of mnemonics, I start every presentation with a recitation - by memory - of the NY Times crossword puzzle of that morning. Of course I use the mnemonic tricks that I teach and write about, but always schedule a nap between first study of the completed puzzle and review.

Mark Owen, the ex-Navy Seal who wrote "No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission That Killed Osama Bin Laden," told 60 Minutes interviewer, Scott Pelley, that most of the participants took a nap on the plane carrying them to the most important mission of their lives. Pelley reasonably assumed it was an indication of their cool. While he wasn't dissuaded from that opinion, I would venture that the nap was something they were trained to do.

Barry Reitman

Author: "Secrets, Tips, and Tricks of a Powerful Memory."

www.MemoryShock.com

Sept. 23, 2012 at 1:39 p.m. RECOMMEND 2



nycpat nyc

No, they took large doses of Ambien.

Sept. 23, 2012 at 2:47 p.m. RECOMMEND



csprof Westchester County, NY

I can't nap at all, even as a child. I feel really sick for the rest of the day if I nap. I also am a chronic night owl forced to live on an early morning schedule. The only way I can make it work is to be chronically mildly sleep deprived. If I actually sleep for 8 hours, then I can't get to sleep the next night until past midnight, which is brutal the next day when I have to be up at 5am. So it is better to sleep only 6 or 7 hours and be a little sleep deprived so I can fall asleep by 11.