Don’t need much sleep? Thank your genes.

Allan Pack wasn’t always a sleep expert. He started his career as a pulmonologist and came to the University of Pennsylvania, in the late 70s, to study the neurophysiology of breathing. Though the work was interesting, Pack wanted to pursue something with a more direct, tangible impact on patients’ lives.

“I realized that there’s not that much clinical significance to pulmonology,” he told me.

Around the same time, the clinical community recognized a new disorder—sleep apnea, a chronic condition in which irregular breathing causes severe sleep disruption. This, it seemed, was the perfect application for Pack’s expertise: a breathing issue, but one with wide clinical implications.

“I appreciated just how impactful it was on people’s lives and how effective the treatment could be. In the end, I gave up the pulmonary side altogether, and became a sleep person,” he says.

In the early eighties, Pack decided to dedicate his lab to the basic questions about sleep: why we sleep; what genes determine sleeping habits, if any; and what happens when sleep is disrupted.

When Pack began studying the nature of sleep deprivation, one fact struck him: when deprived of sleep, some people responded much better than others. After thirty-six hours of sleep deprivation, some might do things like leave their house keys in the fridge or walk to work in slippers. Others would be basically fine.

“We knew it was a stable trait: the same person would respond the same way to being sleep deprived on two separate occasions,” he said. “But what we really wanted to know was how much of that is genetic.” Was resistance something heritable that you could pin down—and then use to help better understand the mechanisms of sleep itself, to aid the chronic sleep sufferers who need it most?

Read the full, original story: A gene that makes you need less sleep?