

By Julie Jacobs

STEP UP Your Slumber & BOOST Your Well-Being

If you think that getting the proper amount of daily “zzzs” only prevents you from feeling tired, think again. In recent years, studies have confirmed the important role sleep plays in one’s overall health. Findings have shown that chronic sleep deprivation actually can cause a variety of health problems.

Investigators at the University of Chicago, for example, have demonstrated how sleep curtailment can adversely affect hormone levels associated with appetite and hunger and lead to weight gain and even obesity. Other researchers have uncovered links between lack of sleep and the onset of cardiovascular disorders and increased risk for diabetes. Sleep debt also has been tied to decreased attention and memory and the body’s ability to fight infection.

While American adults slept an average of nine hours at the turn of the century, today they sleep less than seven. In fact, according to a poll by the National Sleep Foundation, nearly one-third of Americans get six hours or less each night. Experts say that sleeping eight hours is optimal.

With the hectic holiday season just around the corner, it’s important that you get enough rest to stay healthy. Here we take a closer look at sleep deprivation and how you can avoid it.

SLEEP AND WEIGHT

During sleep, the body secretes all kinds of hormones, two of which are connected to hunger: leptin, which helps monitor energy stored in cells and in turn controls appetite and metabolism, and ghrelin, which triggers hunger.

Studies have indicated that an insufficient amount of sleep causes leptin levels to decline and ghrelin levels to rise. The result is not only a greater urge to eat, but also to indulge in calorie-dense, high-carb foods. Over time, this cycle can lead to weight gain, and in some cases, contribute to obesity.

SLEEP AND DIABETES

Research has shown that chronic sleep deprivation can alter the body’s ability to secrete insulin and process glucose, potentially to the levels associated with type-2 diabetes. In one investigation, participants had their blood sugar tested when their sleep deficiency was greatest and were found to take significantly longer than normal (by as much as 40 percent) to regulate it after a high-carb meal. Also discovered were higher blood levels of the hormone cortisol, which is suspected of causing insulin resistance in older adults.

For more information: medscape.org, sleepdeprivation-effects.com, sleepfoundation.org, webmd.com, wellnessresources.com.



SLEEP AND HEART HEALTH

When we sleep, heart rate and blood pressure typically lower to allow the cardiovascular system to rest. Lack of sleep compromises these functions, leading to high blood pressure—a major risk factor for heart disease—and other cardiac problems. Findings from studies conducted at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston revealed an 82 percent higher risk of heart attack among subjects who slept five or less hours nightly, and a 30 percent higher risk for those who slept only six.

ARE YOU SLEEP DEPRIVED?

Be aware of these signs and symptoms, which may indicate that you need sleep:

- Dozing off while watching television, reading or sitting in meetings
- Making frequent mistakes
- Memory problems
- Attention deficits
- Slower reaction time
- Negativity, depression and impatience
- Difficulty focusing

HOW TO SLEEP WELL

Your sleeping environment is key to good slumber, so make sure your bed and bedding are comfortable and that your bedroom is quiet, cool and dark. Keep to a set routine and hour for bedtime. Also, stay away from alcoholic, sugary and caffeinated drinks and avoid exercising within a few hours of going to bed.

Should you awaken in the middle of the night and are unable to fall back asleep, think relaxing thoughts and do not watch the clock. If after 30 minutes you are still up, get out of bed and try doing soothing activities, like reading or listening to music. ▲