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Health

Sweet Dreams

Rest easier with the following tips on getting a good night's sleep.

By: Christie Bohm Chase, Staff Writer

A blaring alarm, a cold shower, and multiple cups of coffee are vices each of us have used to drag ourselves out of bed in the morning. Most Americans do not get the amount of sleep that their bodies need, and therefore spend the day trying to wake up. For some, lack of time to sleep causes fatigue. Others may toss and turn all night only to awake exhausted. Each of us has experienced sleep deprivation and the effects make for a very rough day.

Although we all know the importance of eating right and the effect food has on our body, or the importance of sunscreen and skin care, few of us actually give any thought to how sleep affects our overall health. Sleep is vital to our bodies because it is the time that most body functions restore and repair. Without sleep our immune system becomes weak and our nervous system does not have time to rest and repair. With inadequate sleep, we become susceptible to various illnesses that well rested bodies ward off, and our judgment, reflexes and stress levels are impacted. Growth hormones are released during sleep, which makes sleep vital to kids and teens growing bodies, but also to adults who need sleep to maintain good health. Sleep greatly affects our mood and behavior. Control over emotions, decision-making ability and social interactions are all compromised when the body is sleep deprived. Tired people are usually very irritable. Some of the more serious affects that chronic or long time lack of sleep have on people are impaired memory and ability to learn; increased incidence of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease; and depression or other emotional problems.

Counting Sheep

The amount of sleep that each of us needs each night varies by person. General rule of thumb is that the body needs 7-9 hours of sleep each night. If you wake up feeling good and you do not fall asleep during the day then you are getting enough sleep. If you have an occasional sleepless or late night, your body will probably need to sleep more the next night to recover. The amount of sleep that you need depends on:

- genetics
- the amount of exercise you get
- what type of day you have
- your age
- the quality of your sleep

A Good Night's Rest

Just because you are not tired does not mean that your body does not need sleep. It is important to get your zzzz's whether you have trouble sleeping or not. Unless you have a sleep disorder that needs medical attention, for most of us who have trouble sleeping there are several tips to help get you nice and sleepy.

There is a reason that kids have a set bedtime each night. A consistent sleep schedule helps the body get in the habit of feeling sleepy and waking at the same time. Adults who use a consistent sleep schedule have an easier time falling asleep and waking than those that widely vary their bedtime. Relaxing bedtime rituals also help the body get into the sleep mode. Some people drink warm milk or tea, others take a hot bath or listen to soft music or turn the TV down low. If you have trouble sleeping, limit your intake of caffeine, alcohol and food before bed. All interfere with the quality of sleep that you get. Exercising early in the day, as exercise invigorates and makes people feel awake. A hot bath or shower can help induce sleep by forcing your body to lower its temperature, which it naturally does as you sleep.

Sleep Disorders

Many people have trouble sleeping. For millions of Americans the trouble is medical. From restless leg syndrome to sleep apnea, many people suffer from sleep disorders and never really realize it. If you wake from 7-9 hours of sleep and feel restless or tired and never really feel good, you may have a sleep disorder. Some people think that they sleep at night, but their body never actually gets into a deep sleep because they snore or have trouble breathing or toss and turn an abnormal amount. Sleep disorders can also affect spouses and their quality of sleep, so if you have inexplicable tiredness or your partner is complaining about your snoring, visit your doctor to discuss sleep disorder possibilities. There are remedies for each type of sleeping problem, and the feeling you get from a good night's sleep will be worth the trip to the doctor.

Driving Drowsy

Everyone knows about the dangers and seriousness of drinking and driving, but few people hesitate to get behind the wheel when they are tired. In fact, millions of people drive tired each day as they make the morning commute to work, drop the kids off at school or venture out on a road trip after a long night of last minute packing.

Drowsy driving can be just as fatal as drunk driving. Like with alcohol, when you are tired, your reaction times slow down and your awareness decreases. According to the National Sleep Foundation, more and more states are enacting legislation that punishes drivers who cause accidents due to fatigue.

There are several ways to avoid drowsy driving, even if the fatigue comes on mid trip.

- Do not drink alcohol or take sedative medication before driving.
- Travel with a companion who can help share the driving and keep conversation to help you stay awake.
- Take a break from driving every 100 miles or so during long trips. Get out of the car and walk around a bit to get your blood pumping.
- Before getting behind the wheel get a good night's sleep. Most adults require between 7-9 hours to maintain proper alertness during the day.
- If you are having trouble staying awake, stop driving, pull off the road and find a safe place to rest or take a needed nap.
- Try drinking caffeine. Two cups of coffee can increase alertness for several hours.

Surfing For Sleep

The Internet is a great resource for learning about sleep patterns, sleep disorders and all things associated with getting a better night's sleep. Check out one of these or many other sleep related web-sites.

- www.sleepfoundation.org
- www.helpguide.org
- www.sleepnet.com
- www.webmd.com