

Better Sleep For Better Health

by Dr. Graham A. Colditz
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ALTON - We people may not think about sleeping as a healthy behavior like we would exercising or eating a healthy diet, but we probably should.

Sleep can play a key role in health and wellness, and studies show that many of us just aren't getting enough of it.

"Short sleep and poor-quality sleep are linked to increased risk of depression, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and some cancers," said Yikyung Park, associate professor in the Division of Public Health Sciences at Washington University School of

Medicine in St. Louis. “A lack of sleep also weakens immune function, making you vulnerable to common infections such as the common cold.”

How can sleep problems have such a wide-ranging effect on health?

For one, they can disrupt the circadian rhythm, our natural “body clock” that controls all biological functions in a 24-hour period, Park said. That disruption can lead to many different reactions in the body that can increase the risk of certain diseases and conditions.

Less directly, sleep problems can also simply make it harder for us to make choices that are good for our health. Lack of sleep can impact decision-making, energy levels and a number of other factors that can make us more likely to stay on the couch rather than get outside for a walk, or choose a fast food meal over making something healthier at home.

About a third of U.S. adults are short sleepers, getting fewer than seven hours of sleep a night. But it’s an issue more common in some groups than others. “There is a significant disparity in sleep duration by race and ethnicity, and income,” Park said. “Short sleep is a particularly important problem for African Americans, multiracial non-Hispanics, American Indians/Alaska Natives and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders – as well as those with lower incomes.” A range of issues can contribute to these differences, including stress, discrimination, job schedules and neighborhood conditions that can make it harder to get good quality sleep.

It’s recommended that most adults get about seven to eight hours of sleep each day. But what counts as healthy amounts of sleep can vary.

“For some people, six hours of sleep a day is enough, but others may need nine hours. And although it’s important to get enough sleep, sleep quality is also crucial,” Park said.

While some of the factors that impact the quality and length of sleep are out of our direct control, there are simple approaches we can take to improve the chances of getting good sleep regularly. As a first step, Park recommends we:

- Put away electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, and TVs at least 30 minutes before bed
- Have a routine sleep schedule – that is, go to bed and wake up at the same time every day
- Avoid large meals within a couple of hours of bedtime
- Avoid caffeinated beverages and alcoholic drinks before bed
- Get regular physical activity, though not close to bedtime



In our busy, round-the-clock world, these changes can be an adjustment. But you don't need to tackle them all at once. Pick just one to start, and then go from there. Small changes build on each other. And like other healthy behaviors, improving the quality of sleep is something well worth the effort and can provide a real boost to health and well-being. And that may just help you rest a bit easier.

It's your health. Take control.

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