

Why Sleep is Vital to a Healthy Life

Tutor's Handbook



The Importance of Sleep

Why is Sleep so Important?

The role that sleep plays in our health and overall well-being is vital. Ensuring that we get enough regular and good quality sleep at the right times can help us to ensure our mental, physical and emotional health, well-being and safety.

Getting adequate quality sleep leads to a better quality of life for all of us. When you get regular, good sleep, you will be happier and healthier when you are awake. This is because when we sleep, although we are laying down and not moving, our bodies are active – supporting healthy brain function and development, repairing cells and maintaining physical health, supporting the growth and development of key physical and cognitive functions in children and adolescents.

When we lose out on this vital sleep, our physical and mental well-being suffer. We can feel lethargic, experience mood-swings, suffer from a lack of concentration and if this sleep deprivation persists, it can lead to chronic health problems. Overall, having a lack of sleep over a prolonged period can affect how well you interact with others, react to situations, think, work, learn and get along with others.

Sleep is Important for Brain Function

Getting adequate sleep is important for a healthy brain. When we're asleep our brain is busy preparing us for the next day – forming new learning pathways in our mind, storing information and helping us to remember information. It has been proven that getting a good night's sleep can help to improve our ability to learn. Sleep also stimulates brain functions such as creativity and memory. It is known that musicians sometimes have trouble learning a new piece of music before bed, but the following morning they can play it a lot better. From this we see that sleep can help to support your learning, and also helps you to refine problem-solving and decision-making skills. That's why if you are struggling with a problem or a decision, sound advice is usually to "sleep on it", and all will be clearer in the morning.

Sleep is Important for Immune Function

Research tells us that people who regularly lose only small amount of their required sleep, show signs of impaired immune function. Small loss of sleep has been shown to impair immune function. One study researched the link between people's sleep habits and the common cold and found that "those who slept less than seven hours were almost three times more likely to develop a cold than those who slept eight hours or more" (Cohen, Doyle et al,

2009). If you notice that you and your family members are getting colds and flus often, make sure that you prioritise getting at least 8 hours sleep each night. This will make you feel better by strengthening your immune system, and it will give you more energy.

Sleep for Weight Management

Research tells us that people who get less sleep each night than recommended, tend to weigh more and that sleep can contribute to us maintaining a healthy weight. In one particular study conducted in 2008, researchers found that “children and adults with short sleep duration were 89% and 55% more likely to become obese, respectively” (Cappuccio, Taggart et al, 2008). This research supports the fact that not getting enough regular sleep is one of the strongest risk factors for obesity.

So why is sleep so important in weight loss and management? It has to do with our hormones and our motivation to be active during the day. Irregular adequate sleep can cause cells to become insulin resistant. Insulin is a hormone that moves sugar from the bloodstream into your body's cells to be used as energy. When cells become insulin resistant, more sugar remains in the bloodstream and the body produces more insulin to compensate. The excess insulin makes you hungrier and tells the body to store more calories as fat. Also, when you are sleep deprived, you will lack energy during the day and your motivation to

exercise to burn off any excess calories you may be eating, also leads to weight gain.

In addition, studies in this area have found that people who are sleep deprived tend to report that they have an increased appetite. So, as well as being awake for longer hours than you should be, if you are sleep deprived you will also eat more during your waking hours.

If you would like to lose weight or maintain your current weight, as well as eating a balanced diet and getting regular exercise, you should also ensure that you get enough quality sleep – see the recommendations below!

Why is Sleep Important for Young People

As important as sleep is for all adults, it is even more important for children and adolescents. In their earlier years, children and teens need adequate sleep to support their physical, emotional behavioural and cognitive development and growth. When children and teens are sleep deprived, they suffer in their daily lives. They might find it difficult to get along with others; they have difficulty paying attention and may perform worse in school than they are capable; they have bouts of frustration, anger and impulsiveness; they experience mood swings; they may feel stressed, sad or depressed, and studies also show that they can lack motivation.

These various behaviours exhibit why it is so important that children and teenagers ensure that they are getting enough sleep.

How Much Sleep is Enough?

The National Sleep Foundation in the US have published the following recommendations for how much sleep people should get at different ages:

- New-borns (0-3 months): Sleep range narrowed to 14-17 hours each day.
- Infants (4-11 months): Sleep range widened two hours to 12-15 hours.
- Toddlers (1-2 years): Sleep range widened by one hour to 11-14 hours.
- Pre-schoolers (3-5): Sleep range widened by one hour to 10-13 hours.
- School age children (6-13): Sleep range widened by one hour to 9-11 hours.
- Teenagers (14-17): Sleep range widened by one hour to 8-10 hours.
- Younger adults (18-25): Sleep range is 7-9 hours.
- Adults (26-64): Sleep range remains at 7-9 hours.
- Older adults (65+): Sleep range is 7-8 hours.

How to use this Resource with your Local Health Group?

This handbook presents some information on about the importance of sleep for our health. To use this resource with your local group, we recommend that you first play the short video lecture and then lead a group discussion about their sleep patterns and habits. To accompany this handbook, you will also find a short PowerPoint presentation that can be used with your local health network. This presentation contains an overview of the reasons why sleep is important. Use this presentation with your group as a prompt to open a discussion about sleep habits. Questions to guide this discussion are included below.

Group Activity

Once you have shared the digital resource and the PowerPoint presentation with your group members, you can start a group discussion about sleep habits. For this, we suggest that you use a flipchart sheet and marker and write up how much sleep is required for different age groups. Then ask the group to discuss:

- Do you get enough sleep?
- Do all members of your family get enough sleep?
- Do you notice any of the symptoms of sleep deprivation when you don't get enough sleep – lack of motivation and concentration, mood-swings, weight gain, loss of energy, etc.



ON CALL

Lay Community Health Advisors



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