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Managing Sleep

Fatigue, drowsiness or just simply being too tired. Poor sleep is taking a toll on society. It can affect our productivity, our social life and even our health and safety. Fatigue can be caused by a variety of factors from psychological causes such as stress, anxiety, or depression to physical ailments. It can even be caused by certain medications, but it is also caused by our lifestyle habits and work schedules.

FATIGUE/INSUFFICIENT SLEEP STATISTICS

- In a recent study, more than half of adults said that poor or insufficient sleep affected their daily activities at least once in the previous seven days.
- Despite sleeping within the recommended number of hours a night, 35 percent reported their sleep quality as "poor" or "only fair."
- Even more alarming is that 13 percent of injuries in the workplace could be contributed to fatigue and that over 5,000 fatal traffic accidents involve drowsy driving every year.

STAGES OF SLEEP

- Let's look at some ways we can effectively manage our sleep to get the best quantity and, more importantly, the best quality of sleep. First, we need to understand that we sleep in stages reflecting different levels of brain activity.
- Stage 1, called light sleep or sleep onset, is the transition from being awake to being asleep. Our eyes are closed, and we start to lose conscious awareness of our external environment. We can still be easily awakened.
- During Stage 2 sleep, we lose more awareness of our environment and our muscles begin to relax. About half of our sleep time is spent in Stage 2 sleep.
- Stages 3 and 4 are slightly different, but both involve deep sleep. Our muscles relax even more, and our breathing and heart rate slows. During deep sleep, it's difficult for us to be wakened.
- Deep sleep is very important because that is when a lot of physical fatigue of the body is repaired after all the physical activity during the day.
- Next, we move on to the stage called REM sleep, which stands for rapid eye movement. During REM sleep, our brain activity greatly increases, our eyes move rapidly and most of our dreams occur. At the same time, our voluntary muscles, such as our arms and legs, become somewhat paralyzed.
- REM sleep is important for our brains to repair and restore themselves. REM sleep also helps us process and solidify our memories.
- The cycle of Stage 1 thru REM sleep typically averages about 90 minutes; this is called a "sleep cycle."

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GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE

- To manage our sleep and to feel the most rested, it's important that we wake up after REM sleep, when our brains are active and closest to being awake. Waking during Stages 3 or 4, when we are in deep sleep, can leave us feeling unrested for much of the day.
- It's not important to just get enough sleep; we also need to make sure we get good quality sleep.
- These practices and habits are known as good sleep hygiene. Good sleep hygiene can help you get quality sleep whether you work during the day or have a night shift.
- We've probably all heard this one: avoid stimulants such as coffee, nicotine, and alcohol.
- The effects of caffeine can last for six hours. Energy drinks with high caffeine content as well as sugar can have an even stronger effect.
- In fact, if you feel the need for energy drinks throughout your day, it's probably a sign that you're already not getting the right quantity or quality of sleep to begin with.
- Avoid eating several hours before bedtime. If you do have an occasional snack before bed, avoid rich foods.
- It's best to be consistent with your sleep schedule. Going to sleep and waking at the same times each day trains your body to set its clock accordingly. Maintaining the schedule on weekends and days off will help you start your week refreshed and alert as well.
- Your sleep environment is important. Make your bedroom into a sleep inducing environment. A dark and cool room around 70 degrees will encourage sleep.
- Even small lights can affect your ability to fall asleep and can disrupt your sleep cycles. Avoid light from clocks or cellphones.
- As we approach bedtime, it's important to slow down our physical activities and brain wave activities.
- Exercise can be very beneficial and can help you get a good night's sleep, but don't exercise within three hours of bedtime. Engage in activities that make you relax such as reading.
- If you watch television or spend time on the computer in the evening, you should be aware that the light emitted from these devices can trick our mind into thinking it's time to be awake. That is why it's recommended that we avoid screen time for an hour or more before going to sleep.
- Sometimes it seems impossible to not take your problems to bed with you. If your thoughts are keeping you from falling asleep, don't be a clock watcher. If you are not asleep in 20 or 30 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room, and do something relaxing until you feel tired enough to go back to bed.
- Practicing good sleep hygiene habits can greatly improve your quality of sleep, but if your problems with sleeping and fatigue persist, by all means, talk to your doctor. Many people suffer from a variety of sleep disorders.

SHIFT WORK RISKS

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- People who are involved in shift work are especially susceptible to fatigue. Working at night and sleeping during the day is at odds with our body's natural circadian rhythm. So it is especially important to learn to manage your sleep if you work at night or work variable shifts.
- Shift work involves a wide swath of our working population, from factories and warehouses to on the road with truck drivers and transit drivers. Hospitals, police and fire departments all have important functions to perform 24/7.

STAYING AWAKE DURING ODD-HOUR SHIFTS

- Let's talk about some good practices for staying awake, alert and safe when you are working on the evening or night shift.
- If possible, take a walk or get some exercise before going to work a late shift, especially if the sun is out. Sunlight will tell your body it is time to be awake.
- Drink plenty of water. It increases the oxygen level in your blood, which can increase alertness.
- Avoid eating one large meal during your shift. Eat healthy, smaller meals on breaks. It will boost your metabolism and decrease that after lunch sluggishness.

ACTIONS TO TAKE UPON COMPLETION OF YOUR SHIFT

- As you near the end of your shift, you need to help your body begin the transition to your upcoming period of sleep. Avoid caffeine near the end of your shift and on your commute home.
- If the sun is up when you leave your workplace, wear sunglasses to minimize the light and help your body feel it is time to wind down for the day.