

Health Effects of Poor Sleep

How much sleep is enough? Infants typically need about 16 hours a day. Teenagers require about nine, while the elderly may need only six. Adults should average seven or eight hours, although some may need only five but others have to have as many as 10 hours each day. Not getting enough sleep can have negative effects on your health in both the short and long term.

From jet lag to insomnia, sleep apnea to sleepwalking, there are more than 80 documented sleep disorders. Other people may have poor sleep habits that prevent them from getting a good night's rest, such as staying up too late or getting up too early. But regardless of the cause, inadequate sleep can harm your health, contribute to poor school or work performance and increase the risk of injury. In the short term, sleep deprivation can cause:

- Abbreviated attention spans and poor concentration
- Impaired memory and cognitive ability
- Increased risk of occupational injury
- Higher risk of automobile injury

Most disorders that cause poor sleep or sleep deprivation can be diagnosed and treated. However, if sleep problems continue, they can cause numerous, serious medical illnesses, including high blood pressure, heart attack and heart failure, stroke, obesity, depression, attention deficit disorder, mental impairment, growth retardation for fetuses and children, and poor quality of life. For example, chronic snoring has been linked to higher rates of heart and brain-related diseases, and sleep apnea is considered a primary risk factor for high blood pressure.

If you have a sleep disorder, you are not alone. Approximately 40 million Americans suffer from chronic, long-term sleep disorders annually and another 20 million experience occasional sleep problems. You can take steps to get a better night's rest and improve your sleep.

- Go to bed only if you are sleepy.
- Get out of bed if you cannot fall asleep in about 20 minutes.
- Have a pre-sleep ritual that can help you relax.
- Go to bed and get up at approximately the same time every day.
- Avoid smoking, alcohol, caffeine and heavy, spicy and sugary foods before bedtime.
- Exercise on a regular basis (but not right before going to bed).
- Make your sleeping area quiet, dark and a little cool.

- Try not to take sleeping pills, or use them with caution.
- Avoid daytime naps if possible.
- Have a small snack before bed so you do not go to bed hungry.

Factors that can interrupt sleep include physical problems such as arthritis or acid reflux, psychological issues including stress and depression, or certain medications that have a side effect of sleeplessness. You should talk with your doctor if you find that your sleeping problem persists, occurs more than three nights per week for longer than one month, or you have other symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath. For more information about sleep disorders, visit the American Academy of Sleep Medicine Web site at www.sleepeducation.com or talk to your doctor.