

HEALTH AWARENESS: FATIGUE & SLEEP HEALTH



A good night's sleep is wonderful; it promotes health, restores the body and mind, and is essential to be able to work safely and efficiently. But sadly, for many, getting enough rest to offset fatigue seems impossible. It's one thing to recommend that everyone should get 8 hours of sleep, its quite another to rise before the sun, complete a day at work, drive home, do your chores, find time to engage with your family, *and* expect to get to bed on time. There are however, a few things that you can do to try and get a good night's rest. Here are the basics on what sleep does, what's important about it, and how to get the most out of it.

How fatigue affects us:

Sleep affects every aspect of our health. We know that when people don't get enough sleep, their bodies and minds are negatively affected and the risk of major health problems increases significantly.

Both short term sleep loss (one or two nights of 5-6 hours sleep) and chronic sleep deprivation (getting less than 8 hours on a regular basis) slow down reaction time, impair our perception of risk and information processing and our ability to make good decisions. This is critical because even a fraction of a second delay in reaction time can lead to a serious incident. Mood is also affected by sleep loss; irritability, impatience and depression are all increased and impair the way we interact with others, assess risks, and make decisions.

The critical phases of sleep:

There are a few different stages of sleep that we cycle through each night. When you first fall asleep you pass through two stages of relatively light sleep. After about 20 minutes you enter the third stage, called non-REM stage 3. This is the deep sleep phase that gives us the greatest feeling of being well rested. Unfortunately, as we age we spend less time in deep sleep, which might explain why it's harder to get a really restful sleep the older we are. The last stage of sleep is REM or rapid eye movement sleep. It occurs about 90 minutes after falling asleep and is the phase where most dreaming happens.

Facts:

- One in three Canadians don't get enough sleep, one in two are not refreshed by their usual sleep.
- Even a one-hour sleep loss can affect you. Heart attacks, traffic fatalities and worksite injuries all increase in the three days after setting clocks forward for daylight savings time.
- Insufficient sleep slows reaction time, makes it harder to stay alert and make good decisions, and impairs memory. It also affects mood, increasing irritability and depression.
- Chronic sleep loss increases the risk of weight gain, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and cancer. It also weakens your immune system increasing your susceptibility to flus and other infections.

- Surveys in the USA and Australia have found that nearly one in three truck drivers suffer from sleep apnea. This disease results in very poor sleep duration and quality and increased health and safety risks.

What to expect:

- Most people get less sleep as they age. Some of this is due to changes in your brain and body, but much of it is due to having more responsibilities that interfere with how much time you have to sleep, and how relaxed you are when you go to bed.
- It takes time to build good sleep habits. Stick with it and your sleep will get better.
- There are days when you will be tired. Go a little slower on those days or stop working if your work and safety are going to be impaired. Let the people around you know you are tired so that they can help you, and be conscious of how your fatigue will affect your thoughts and actions.
- Chronic sleep loss can lead to episodes of microsleep where your brain has brief periods of sleep (several seconds) when you are normally awake. These are very dangerous as they cause short periods where conscious attention is lost.

What you can do:

- Set up a program of good sleep practices. Buddy up with family members or a good friend to help you build these new habits.
- Don't consume caffeine within at least six hours of bedtime – caffeine is an effective stimulant. If you need to wake up, 300 mg taken 30-60 minutes prior to when needed works well (about 2 cups brewed coffee, check the amount in your energy drink and the number of servings in the container).
- Also avoid alcohol and nicotine near bedtime. They do not make you sleep better.
- Don't watch TV, use your computer or phone before bedtime. If you have an e-reader set it to a dark background.
- Keep your bedroom dark and quiet.
- Try to get to bed at the same time everyday, and have some kind of relaxation ritual. Things like reading for 10 minutes, a warm bath or shower, meditation or listening to some quiet music can help you to relax and clear your mind.
- If you snore heavily, are male, are very overweight or have a thick neck you have a higher risk of sleep apnea. Get tested if you don't sleep well and have some of these risk factors.
- Avoid napping in the evening. If you do nap, keep it less than 20 minutes or longer than 90 minutes to avoid waking from the deep sleep phase.
- Get regular exercise. Exercise makes it easier to fall asleep, stay asleep and increases the amount of time that you spend in deep sleep. But the act of exercising wakes you up, so try to do it earlier, rather than later in the day.

What Employers and Supervisors can do:

- Encourage your workers to discuss the importance of getting enough rest and to share tips that they use to relax before bed.
- Assess workers to see if they are fatigued at work. If necessary, find alternate work and help them develop a plan to allow them to get better sleep.
- Bring in a respiratory therapist from your local hospital or respiratory services company to talk about sleep apnea, CPAP machines and other options for treatment.

- Encourage anyone with risk factors for sleep apnea to get tested and then follow up to make sure that they are using their treatment. It's estimated that up to 50% of people diagnosed do not use their CPAP machine.

More information:

Healthy Sleep Guide: nhlbi.nih.gov/files/docs/public/sleep/healthy_sleep.pdf

National Institute on Aging Sleep Resources: nia.nih.gov/health/good-nights-sleep

Canadian Sleep Society: css-scs.ca/resources/brochures

Sleep Hygiene Checklist: mysleepwell.ca/cbti/hygiene-of-sleep/