

Don't Deprive Yourself of Much Needed Sleep

For many cash-strapped Americans, a daily reality is the second or even third job they have taken to make financial ends meet. What's wrong with this picture? Nothing, providing these extra hours are not robbing them of precious sleep. But for far too many of these moonlighters, working harder and longer also means skimping on sleep — a lifestyle change that ultimately may render all this extra work and money nil.

How? By placing you at higher physical risk. Sleep deprivation reduces reaction time, which, in turn, makes you more prone to accidents — a catastrophe in the making, especially if you are medically uninsured. Experts urge adults to get between six and 10 hours of sleep each night, though many recommend around eight hours. Children require even more — as much as nine and even 10 hours of sleep in some cases.

Aside from increased risks of physical injury, sleep deprivation also has been shown to impose severe stress on long-term physical well-being. Sleep deprivation causes hormonal changes within the body — changes that contribute to chronic conditions such as metabolic syndrome and, ultimately, to a host of other serious medical conditions.

"People who are chronically sleep-deprived tend to be heavier, and the secretion of certain hormones, in turn, make you want to eat more, which only complicates the problem," says Dr. Robert Keith, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System nutrition and health specialist and Auburn University professor of nutrition and food science who has closely followed the research within the past few years.

Hormonal changes that accompany deprivation can also affect insulin resistance, which increases the risk of developing full-blown diabetes. In fact, Keith suspects sleep deprivation may be an understated factor behind the national surge in type 2 diabetes. "If you're uninsured, this may mean that you're more likely to encounter the sorts of health problems you're desperately trying to avoid," he says.

Sleep deprivation also has been shown to play havoc on the immune system. "Besides these chronic diseases, you are more prone to colds, flu and other things that pop up acutely and unexpectedly," Keith says. Researchers over the last few decades have gained lots of insight into what constitutes effective sleep patterns.

Rule 1: Choose Regular Sleep Over Catnapping

"Sleep typically involves patterns where you start out with lighter sleep and pass into a much deeper sleep — a cycle that may be repeated several times a night," Keith says. Adequate sleep requires passing through all of these phases — something you don't get with catnaps.

Rule 2: Avoid Late-Night Caffeine and Alcohol

If you're striving to get regular amounts of effective sleep, stay away from caffeinated drinks, such as tea and coffee during the hours before bedtime, Keith says. The same rule applies to late-night alcohol. Alcohol nightcaps ultimately are self-defeating — yes, they make you drowsy, but they also disrupt sleep patterns.

Rule 3: Avoid Exercising in the Evening

"Exercise is good for you, but it does gear up your system and can undermine your sleep if it's postponed until late in the day," Keith says.

Despite the best efforts of health experts, Keith says sleep deprivation, much like obesity and sedentary lifestyles, will remain a permanently ingrained problem.