Laying down the facts about sleep: NetWellness

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By Special to The Plain Dealer

How much sleep did you get last night? It's difficult to believe that one-third of the average human life is spent sleeping. After all, life pulls us in many different directions each day. From working late hours and maintaining the house to spending time with family and friends, it's surprising that anyone has time for sleep at all.

While the issue of inadequate sleep is not a new one, today's technology can serve as a distraction, as well as allowing us to work harder and longer, and a good night's rest is usually the first thing to be sacrificed because of it.

Though everyone recognizes how a poor night's sleep affects them, we have only recently begun to fully understand the profound impact that sleep, or lack thereof, has on our health and well-being. The consequences of sleep-related problems range from simply not feeling well, to increased risks of work and traffic-related accidents, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Given the body's need for sleep, it is in the best interest of your health to get enough sleep.

However, your actions may not be the only obstacle keeping you from a good night's rest.

Many people are not aware that they may suffer from one of the more than 80 recognized sleep disorders that are recognized in the International Classification of Sleep Disorders. Almost all of these conditions, once diagnosed, can be treated successfully. Identifying and treating sleep problems, and putting sleep back on top of your priority list, are strong steps toward getting the sleep you deserve.

Getting the most out of your sleep

Everyone is different, and the amount of sleep a person needs to feel rested is not an exception. While some people require at least eight hours of sleep to feel refreshed, others may function well on only six hours. Regardless of the time that's right for you, there are steps that you can take to get the most out of your nightly rest.

- Try to go to bed only when you are drowsy.
- Maintain a regular wake time (even on days off work and on weekends).
- Keep a regular schedule.
- Avoid napping during the daytime.
- Do not spend excessive amounts of time in bed.
- Avoid heavy meals before bedtime.
- Try to exercise regularly, but at least six hours before bedtime.
- Avoid ingestion of caffeine within six hours of bedtime.
- Do not drink alcohol when sleepy.
- Avoid the use of nicotine close to bedtime or during the night.

This NetWellness column was reviewed by Dr. Dennis Auckley, associate professor of medicine, School of Medicine, Case Western Reserve University.

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For more information, visit the sleep disorders health topic.
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For these and other healthy practices to put you on the road toward better sleep, visit the NetWellness exclusive, "Common Sense Tips for Good Sleep."

Making sleep a priority is something that everyone should consider, but it is especially important for evening and overnight shift workers as well as people who frequently work long hours in demanding jobs. These groups are more likely to suffer from chronic sleep problems, putting them at a higher risk for depression, fatigue-related accidents, and medical conditions such as increased cholesterol, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Sleep is a restorative process, and it is something that the body needs in order to function well. Without sleep, not only the worker but those who rely on them can suffer. Learn more about recognizing the signs of poor sleep and how shift workers can improve their sleep practices.

When to see your doctor

Sometimes a poor night’s sleep feels outside of your control, but often a solution can be found through a trip to the doctor. If after following healthy sleep practices you continue to struggle with sleep, there may be an underlying sleep disorder that you and your doctor can address together. It may be time to see your doctor if you are dissatisfied with the quality or quantity of your sleep, routinely feeling sleepy during the day or are experiencing unusual behaviors while asleep, such as sleep walking, sleep talking, persistent snoring or problems breathing.

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