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For millions of Americans, shedding unwanted pounds is a top priority, especially in the summer swimsuit season. That's why the National Sleep Foundation is reminding Americans that spending more time between the sheets may be part of the secret to slimming down and looking great on the beach or by the pool.

People tend to forego sleep in order to make time for a work-out or other daily activities and it is often overlooked as an important factor in the battle of the bulge.

Sleep and appetite

Many do not realize that skimping on sleep can actually make it harder to lose weight, says Dr. Meir H. Kryger, chairman of NSF's board of directors. Research suggests that even a modest amount of sleep deprivation can increase appetite by altering the behavior of the hormones leptin and ghrelin, which are responsible for regulating appetite and metabolism. As a result of sleep loss, people may experience stronger cravings for carbohydrates and calorie-rich comfort foods such as cookies and chips, which can lead to weight gain.

Sleep and diabetes

Recent research suggests that people who sleep less may also produce more insulin, which puts them at higher risk of developing Type 2 Diabetes.
and obesity are both on the rise in the U.S., causing many Americans to suffer serious health complications. In order to help fight these conditions and promote healthy lifestyles for all Americans, the NSF is sending a wake up call to remind people that sleep is as important as diet and exercise, only easier!

"Healthy sleep is a part of an antidote for the obesity and diabetes epidemics in America," says Kryger

Sleep loss and obesity

In addition to mounting scientific evidence, the results of NSF’s 2008 Sleep in America poll, released in early March 2008, suggests that sleep loss and obesity are linked.

According to the poll, people who are overweight/obese are more likely than people of normal weight to spend less time in bed on workdays (6.82 hours vs. 7.12 hours) and to sleep less than 6 hours per night (17% vs. 12%).

NSF’s 2008 poll also reveals that having a weight problem can have a negative impact on one's health and safety. According to the results, those who are overweight/obese are more likely to:

- Have been told by their doctor that they have a sleep disorder (18% vs. 6%)
- Have driven drowsy at least once a month in the past year (35% vs. 26%)
- Be at risk of having a sleep problem such as obstructive sleep apnea (20% vs. less than 1%) and restless legs syndrome (14% vs. 4%)

Steps to better sleep

For people with sleep disorders, getting adequate sleep may require the help of a healthcare professional. But for many Americans, healthy sleep can be achieved with just a few simple steps. Try these tips for better Zzzs:

- Make sleep a top priority. Getting optimal sleep allows you to feel your best and be productive. Healthy sleep also helps to regulate your metabolism.
- Maintain a consistent sleep schedule. Going to bed and waking up at the same time every day keeps your biological clock in tune.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine. A regular routine, such as having a bath or listening to soothing music, can help you fall asleep and stay asleep.
- Use your bedroom only for sleep. Clear your bedroom of distractions such as computers, phones and other "sleep stealers" in order to create a positive sleep association with the bedroom.
- Avoid foods and drinks high in caffeine. These (coffee, colas and tea) should be avoided for at least eight hours prior to bedtime, and avoid alcohol for a few hours before bedtime.
- Exercise regularly. However, finish your workout at least three hours before bedtime.
• Chocolate can help lower blood pressure and bad cholesterol, but it also delivers caffeine.

• Prenatal vitamins can be harmful to nonpregnant women.

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• Research suggests the best thing to do for an ear infection may be nothing.
• Diet rich in fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy and whole grains found to lower heart failure rates.

• Talk to Your Doctor. If you are experiencing a sleep problem, such as difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or if you suffer from chronic daytime sleepiness despite allowing adequate time for sleep, talk to your healthcare professional.

For more information about sleep and sleep disorders, and for more results of NSF's 2008 Sleep in America poll, visit the National Sleep Foundation.