

HEALTH WARNING

Lack of sleep can seriously
damage your health



IT'S EARLY MORNING and the alarm's ringing – time to get up. A few of us will leap out of bed, energised after a good night's rest, feeling alert and ready to face the day ahead. However, as many as two thirds of us would much prefer to ignore the buzzing alarm and go back to sleep. If this rings a bell with you, then you're not alone. Sleep researchers estimate that approximately 75% of people in the UK wake up every morning feeling exhausted.

Getting a good night's sleep is not just a matter of going to bed and closing your eyes, according to Dr Carol Landis, sleep researcher and associate professor in bio-behavioural nursing. "Sleep is a behaviour and, like all behaviours, it varies greatly among people. The greatest differences

occur in the timing and amount of sleep," she concludes.

Sleep is obviously an important factor in all our lives. When we sleep well at night, we rest and gain energy for a new day. It's important that children enjoy a good night's sleep because poor sleeping habits can impact on all the family's health, moods and general well-being.

"Most people don't pay attention to the timing of their sleep," Landis notes, "yet delaying or altering the time you go to sleep can have a major impact on how you feel when you wake up."

CHILDREN

A recent survey of 1083 British school-children aged between 9 and 11 years

concluded that a love of electronic gadgets such as television, video games and mobile phones was leading to many children missing out on vital sleep at night. Responses to the recent BBC's Newsround questionnaire indicated that more than half the children in the survey had a television in their bedroom and nearly 70% of respondents were not even going to bed until 9.30pm or later, even though health experts would generally recommend about ten hours sleep a night for children aged ten years. Many of the children were unable to mentally switch off even when their gadgets had shut down for the night.

Paul Gringrass, a paediatrician in charge of the children's sleep clinic at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospital in London states,





“Children aren’t just little adults. There’s a huge amount of brain development going on (in the early years of life) and we know that even moderate sleep loss impacts on their ability to concentrate and behave the following day.”

He maintains that a lack of sleep often

we sleep and wake, will be permanently affected. His research, published in “Brain and Development” mirrors recent NHS statistics. These indicate the number of children under the age of 11 referred to sleep clinics and hospitals – specialising in insomnia, sleepwalking and sleep-related

casualties of sleep shortage. She firmly believes that sleep-education should be an integral part of the UK Government’s recent “Change 4 Life” healthy living campaign.

Older children are probably in even greater need of sleep education, according to Russell Foster, Professor of Circadian Neuroscience at Brasenose College, Oxford, because they’re often subject to fewer parental controls and have more freedom as to bedtimes. Professor Foster says, “The good news is that if emerging problems are treated in childhood, they can often be resolved.” If not, these problems can be life-long. Something for parents, teachers, health-care professionals and politicians to sleep on and digest.

“It’s time to reclaim the night for sleep”, says Neil Stanley, sleep researcher at the University of East Anglia. “We all know the health risks of smoking, drinking and eating too much but we don’t pay enough attention to the risks of having too little sleep. Unfortunately, we live in a society that has forgotten that sleep is as important as good diet and exercise in terms of healthy living.”

WORK

Stanley maintains that we live in ‘an increasingly tired society’, a 24/7 society dominated by ever-changing technology. ‘The technology never sleeps’, says Stanley.

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affects children’s growth and appetite as well. “There are certain hormones we produce more of when we’ve had a bad, disrupted night which make us hungrier. We have this obesity epidemic. It’s a vicious cycle.”

Many parents make a point of keeping televisions, computers and video games out of children’s bedrooms, believing that children can easily become addicted to the buzz and have difficulty getting to sleep as a result. According to Dr Jun Kohyama, a paediatrician at Tokyo Medical and Dental University, the effect of late nights on a child’s body clock is far greater than an adult’s. He believes bad sleep habits in children will be difficult to reverse later in life and that the brain functions known as circadian rhythms, which determine when

breathing problems - had risen by 26% over five years.

Mandy Gurney was asked to set up a sleep clinic in a North London Health Authority because Health Chiefs anticipated that simply helping children to sleep better would result in huge cost savings in health treatments over their lifetimes. Chronically sleep-deprived children are more prone to a broad spectrum of health problems that include obesity, hypertension and clinical depression.

EDUCATION

Kathleen McGrath, a paediatric nurse who has written the “Good-night Guide for Children” booklet on behalf of the UK Sleep Council, is convinced that attention, memory and learning are some of the first

The result is often long hours, information overload and all the stresses of modern-day living. Contemporary society requires that many people work with sleep loss, whether through shift-working or long working hours.

'Sleep Deficit: The Performance Killer' is the title of an article published in the Harvard Business Review, 2006, by Professor Charles A Czeisler, the Baldino Professor of Sleep Medicine at Harvard

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Medical School. He is critical of companies which glorify the executive who logs 100-hour workweeks, the road warrior who lives out of a suitcase and the negotiator who takes a red-eye to make an 8am meeting.

Czeisler recommends that companies institute corporate sleep policies to

discourage work schedules beyond 16 consecutive hours. Working or driving immediately after late-night or overnight flights can be particularly problematic.

DRIVING

Motorists who get behind the wheel and drive when tired account for 20% of Britain's road accidents, according to new findings by online motor insurance company InsureYourMotor.com. In 2009,

driver drowsiness was considered to be the main cause of 40,000 serious injuries and 3,500 deaths on the UK roads. The problem, according to the researchers, is becoming so extreme that tiredness whilst driving now claims more lives than accidents involving drink-drivers. Sleep-related road accidents are three times more

likely to result in death or serious injury because drowsy drivers do not brake early enough to prevent an accident. Reaction times are so much slower, say researchers, and it's often only the impact itself that alerts these drivers.

The National Sleep Foundation's 2010 Sleep in America poll is the first to study sleep patterns among ethnic groups. One of America's leading sleep experts, Dr Allan Pack, a University of Pennsylvania professor, believes that there may well be genetic variations which determine the amount of sleep that people need. In his study, he states that 17 per cent of African-Americans reported doing job-related tasks in the hour before bedtime; the figures were 16%, 13% and 9% respectively for Asian, Hispanic and Caucasian adults included in his study. He is of the opinion that socio-economic factors have a large part to play. "Many of these people are sleeping short", he says, "not because they don't understand the importance of sleep but because of the pressure of their lives."

With the UK gripped by election fever,



spare a thought for the politicians travelling the length and breadth of the country, by day and night, in their battle-buses. A UK Sleep Council study in 2005 concluded that politicians were amongst the most sleep-

deprived of all professionals, averaging a meagre 5.2 hours per night - far less than solicitors (7.8), mothers of young children (7.1) and teachers (6.0). Only hospital doctors managed less shut-eye with 4.5 hours.

Contemporary society requires that many people work with sleep loss, whether through shift-working or long working hours

hours into the day as possible. However, when we become sleep-deprived, we begin to pay the price; we become generally less productive, our immune system weakens and we are more prone and vulnerable to

infections and diseases. We also run an increased risk of accidents.

“It has been proven,” states Professor Cary Cooper, “that a lack of sleep causes stress, psychologically and physiologically. Cooper, Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University Management School says that we all need

sufficient sleep because “it gives us the opportunity to process information and also because we are biological machines with a lot of moving parts that need to be renewed and repaired during the sleeping hours.”

By learning how to avoid common pitfalls that get in the way of sleep and adopting a few sleep-inducing techniques, we can improve the quality of our sleep. Particularly important is developing a relaxing bedtime routine – unlike many of the ten year olds in the BBC Newsround poll. Even with the stresses of daily life, if you make a real effort to relax and wind down before going to bed at night, manage stress and anxiety more effectively and keep your bedroom quiet, dark and well-ventilated, you might well be one of the lucky ones who enjoy quality sleep at night.

With our busy modern-day schedules, we're often tempted to squeeze as many

