

The Benefits of Sleep

How you feel during your waking hours depends, in part, on how you sleep. While you are sleeping, your body is working to support healthy brain function and maintain your physical health. In children and teens, sleep is especially important because it can also help support growth and development.

While quality sleep has many benefits, ongoing sleep deficiency comes with significant risks. Prolonged sleep deficiency can affect how well you think, react, work, learn and even socialize with others.

Healthy Brain Function and Emotional Well-Being

Sleep helps your brain work properly. While you sleep, your brain is preparing for the next day. It is forming new pathways to help you learn and remember information.

Sleep helps enhance your learning and problem-solving skills while also helping you pay attention, make decisions, and be creative.

If you are sleep deficient, you may find you have trouble

- making decisions
- solving problems
- controlling your emotions and behavior
- coping with change.

Sleep deficiency also has been linked to depression, suicide, and risk-taking behavior.

Physical Health

Sleep plays an important role in your physical health by supporting healthy growth and development.

Deep sleep triggers the body to release the hormone that promotes normal growth in children and teens. This hormone also boosts muscle mass and helps repair cells and tissues in children, teens, and adults. Puberty and fertility can also be impacted by sleep patterns.

The immune system relies on sleep to stay healthy. This system defends your body against foreign or harmful substances. Ongoing sleep deficiency can change the way in which your immune system responds.

Prolonged sleep deprivation or deficiency has been linked to an increased risk of:

- heart disease
- kidney disease
- high blood pressure

- diabetes
- stroke
- obesity

Daytime Performance and Safety

Getting enough quality sleep at the right times can help you function well throughout the day. People who are sleep deficient are less productive at work and school. They can take longer to finish tasks, have a slower reaction time and make more mistakes.

Lack of sleep may also lead to microsleep, which refers to brief moments of sleep that occur when you are normally awake.

When and where you experience microsleep is often out of your control. Chances are, you might not even be aware it is happening. For example, if you have ever been driving and were not able to remember part of the trip or were in a lecture and missed some of the information, you may have unconsciously slept through it.

Experiencing sleep deprivation or deficiency while driving is especially dangerous. Studies show that sleep deficiency harms your driving ability as much as, or more than, being drunk. It is estimated that driver sleepiness is a factor in about 100,000 car accidents each year, resulting in about 1,500 deaths.

Those affected by sleep deficiency can incur risks outside of just driving. It can affect people in all lines of work, including health care workers, pilots, students, lawyers, mechanics, and assembly line workers.

As a result, sleep deficiency is not only harmful on a personal level, but it also can cause large-scale damage. For example, sleep deficiency has played a role in human errors linked to tragic accidents, such as nuclear reactor meltdowns, grounding of large ships, and aviation accidents.

How To Discuss Sleep With Your Doctor

Due to sleep habits playing such a vital role in a person's health and well-being, it is important to consider talking to your doctor if you:

- often feel sleepy during the day
- do not wake up feeling refreshed and alert
- have trouble adapting to shift work

Your doctor will likely ask you about your sleep habits. Before you see the doctor, consider keeping a sleep diary for a couple of weeks. Write down when you go to sleep, wake up, and take naps.

Consider also writing down how much you sleep each night, how alert and rested you feel in the morning, as well as how sleepy you feel at various times during the day. Share the information in your sleep diary with your doctor.

Resources

- National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute: www.nhlbi.nih.gov

- National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov
- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org
- MedlinePlus: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus

Some of this content for this article was gathered from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. Their website can be found at <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>

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