An Important Connection

Adequate sleep is key to living a healthy lifestyle. Sleep affects your feelings, attitudes, relationships, productivity, and most importantly, your quality of life.

It is well-known that sleep problems can be a key sign of depression. What people may not realize is that the reverse is also true — sleep disorders can actually trigger mood disorders such as depression. As researchers learn more about the underlying cyclical connection between sleep and our mental health, the important balance is becoming even more apparent.

“In our culture, we are constantly inundated with long-term health concerns which can overwhelm people, perhaps even leading them to ignore warning signs altogether,” said Amy Wolfson, PhD, sleep expert, psychologist, professor and author of A Woman’s Book of Sleep. “However, sleep-deprivation impacts our everyday life, from increased risk of car accidents, to reduced memory and job performance, to depressed mood; the results go beyond long-term, they are serious and immediate.”

“Being healthy doesn’t pertain just to our physical health -- mental and physical well-being go hand-in-hand,” said Cynthia Wainscott, former acting president and CEO of Mental Health America (formerly the National Mental Health Association). “We know that sleep plays a vital role in our overall health and continue to learn how changes in sleep habits may contribute to changes in your mental health. For this reason alone, quality sleep is central to any healthy lifestyle.”

The Better Sleep Month survey found that better sleep did result in better moods among respondents. When asked to rate their sleep quality, quantity, and overall mood over the course of one week, people who obtained seven or more hours per night were more likely to rate their general mood as excellent (57 percent), as opposed to those receiving an average of six hours of sleep or less (45 percent).

Regardless of the growing dialogue on the health implications of sleep deprivation, ranging from increased risk of heart disease and obesity to decreased immune response and mental functioning, the issue is still pervasive. The 2006 Better Sleep Council poll found that 41 percent of respondents are getting six hours of sleep or less each night, an insufficient amount of sleep for most adults.

However, more sleep doesn’t necessarily mean better, especially if underlying factors that contribute to poor sleep, such as an inadequate sleep environment or sleep-depriving behaviors, are not properly addressed. It may just mean that you end up tossing and turning in your bed for a longer time.

If you are experiencing persistent sleep or mood problems, you should call impact at 1-800-227-6007 or seek help from your health care professional.

Information from www.bettersleep.org. Established in 1979, the Better Sleep Council (BSC) is a non-profit organization supported by the mattress industry. The BSC is devoted to educating the public about the importance of sleep to good health and quality of life and about the value of the sleep system and sleep environment in pursuit of a good night's sleep.
Here are some tips from the Cleveland Clinic (found at www.clevelandclinic.org/health) to help you get a good night’s sleep:

- Minimize noise with earplugs.
- Minimize light with window blinds, heavy curtains, or an eye mask. Do not turn on bright lights if you need to get up at night. Use a small night-light instead.
- Avoid eating within two hours of bedtime. If you are hungry, a glass of milk or a light snack is a good choice. Avoid consuming protein at bedtime.
- Get aerobic exercise during the day to reduce stress hormones, but avoid anything too strenuous (aside from sex) within three hours of bedtime. Regular exercise might promote deeper sleep.
- Go to bed at a regular time and avoid napping late in the afternoon. If you need to nap, take a brief nap for 10 to 15 minutes about eight hours after you awake.
- Stop working at any task an hour before bedtime to calm mental activity.
- At bedtime, keep your mind off worries or things that upset you. Avoid discussing emotional issues in bed.
- Consider having pets stay outside of your sleeping area. Having a pet in bed with you might cause you to wake if you have allergies or if the pet moves around on the bed.
- Make sure your bedroom is well-ventilated and at a comfortable temperature (below 75°F and above 54°F).
- Keep your bedroom for sleeping. If you can't sleep or if you wake up, go into another room and read a book or watch television until you feel sleepy.
- Learn a relaxation technique, such as progressive muscle relaxation, and practice it in bed.
- Nicotine is a stimulant and should be avoided particularly near bedtime and upon night awakenings. Having a cigarette before bed might feel relaxing, but nicotine is a stimulant and might interfere with sleep.
- Caffeine should be discontinued at least four to six hours before bedtime. If you consume large amounts of caffeine and you cut yourself off too quickly, you might get headaches that could keep you awake. Caffeine is also a stimulant and is present in substances including coffee, cola, tea, chocolate, and various over-the-counter medicines.
- Alcohol is a depressant and might help you fall asleep, but the subsequent metabolism that clears it from your body when you are sleeping causes a withdrawal syndrome. This withdrawal causes awakenings and is often associated with nightmares and sweats.