

SLEEP

Night Owl Nation

College students, like Americans overall, are sleeping less. The college years are notoriously sleep-deprived due to all-night cram sessions, parties, TV, the net and a general overload of activity. On average, college students today are going to bed 1-2 hours later and sleeping 1-1.6 hours less than they did a generation ago. As a result, sleep complaints and depression have increased dramatically among college students.

Why Do We Need Sleep?

Sleep maintains your circadian rhythms (the light-dependent 24-hour cycle that regulates body and mind), restores your body functions and strengthens your immune system. It also helps you remember what you learn and prepares you for your next challenge.

How Much Sleep Do I Need?

Many adults function best with around 8 hours of sleep, but each person has unique needs. Sleep requirements depend on the environment, stress, health, age and many other variables.

But if you're like most college students, you're not getting enough sleep. On average, college students get only 6-6.9 hours of sleep per night.

Consequences of Sleep Loss

For many students, it's a sign of achievement to function on minimal sleep, but lack of sleep carries risks. Less than 6.5 (or more than 9) hours of sleep per night is associated with 1.7 times greater risk of disease and death. Lack of sleep causes:

- Decreased academic performance
- Automobile accidents (fatigue is the leading cause)
- Illness such as colds and flu
- Mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety

Sleep Loss Is Linked to Depression

In college students, depression is two times more common than in the general population, affecting approximately 20% of students. Researchers believe that lack of sleep contributes to this high rate of depression in college students. Attending college increases the incidence of both sleep problems and depression.

Sleep disturbance for more than two weeks is a risk factor for developing depression. More than 80% of individuals who suffer from depression also have sleep abnormalities, and if sleep problems persist after depression has subsided, the risk of relapse and even suicide increases.

How Can I Get More/Better Sleep? Follow these tips to get the most out of your sleep time.

- Maintain regular rise and bed times every night, including weekends.
- Take a very hot bath (for about 15 minutes) 1.5 hours before bedtime.
- Turn down the thermostat and avoid electric blankets at bedtime.
- Dim the lights at night. Bright lights suppresses the secretion of melatonin, a hormone produced by the brain's pineal gland that helps regulate the circadian rhythm. Get bright light in early morning and avoid bright light in the late afternoon and evening so you can get to sleep at night. Use low-wattage incandescent light. Also, use very dark curtains or wear a mask for sleep.
- Restrict caffeine to 1-2 cups before 10 AM and avoid nicotine (smoking tobacco) in the evening. These stimulants make it more difficult to relax into sleep.
- Drink warm milk a half-hour before bedtime.
- Don't eat food within 2 hours of bedtime. Large meals take time to digest and make sleep difficult; likewise, liquids may interrupt sleep by causing a trip to the bathroom.
- Exercise regularly to tire your body, but be aware that exercising within 2 hours of bedtime may actually leave your body too energized to relax!
- Avoid napping. Approximately 30-50% of college students nap, but the effect is that nappers sleep less than non-nappers. If you do nap, nap early in the day and keep it short.
- Limit use of alcohol (or don't drink) because it disrupts sleep. Also be aware that alcohol can magnify the effects of sleep-deprivation.
- Avoid routine use of sleeping pills or other sleep aids, which reduce sleep quality. Also, be aware that products classified as dietary supplements (e.g. melatonin) are not regulated by the US Food and Drug Administration, so the strength and quality of such products is not guaranteed.
- Avoid jet lag.
- Create your own sleep rituals - listen to calming music, brush your teeth, read a book, write in a journal - to signal your body and mind that it is time to sleep.
- If you can't sleep, get up - don't lay in bed and worry. Do something relaxing until you feel sleepy, then go back to bed.

How to Minimize the Effect of Sleep Loss on Grades

Make time for adequate rest before essay exams. While your memory skills may be relatively unimpaired (e.g., for a multiple choice test), losing a night's sleep can decrease processing and analyzing skills.

If you have to pull an all-nighter, go to bed early the next night rather than napping during the day. While short daytime naps can be refreshing, longer naps can upset your internal clock. If you do nap during the day, limit it to less than 30 minutes.

Do I Have a Sleep Disorder? Sleep disorders can affect the rest you get. If you experience any of the following, seek medical advice.

Insomnia is the inability to fall or stay asleep. While this is a normal, relatively harmless short-term reaction to stress or excitement, chronic insomnia (lasting more than three weeks) may suggest an underlying health problem and should be checked out.

Narcolepsy is an inherited condition of excessive sleepiness that causes temporary loss of muscle control and/or uncontrollable "sleep attacks." There is no cure for narcolepsy, although it can be controlled through drug treatment.

Obstructive sleep apnea is a condition in which the soft tissue of the upper airway repeatedly collapses during sleep and cuts off breathing for a short time, and then the airway opens abruptly and noisily. The constant interruptions of sleep cause excessive sleepiness during the day, but sleep apnea may go unnoticed unless someone sleeps in the same room and hears the interruptions. This condition occurs most frequently in middle-aged men.

Restless legs is a condition in which the legs jerk uncontrollably during sleep, disturbing sleep and causing daytime sleepiness.

When Should I Get Help? Consider professional assistance if you:

- Have trouble getting to sleep or wake up frequently during the night for a period of several weeks.
- Fall asleep at inappropriate times even after a night of adequate sleep.
- Have sudden attacks of uncontrollable sleep or muscle weakness.
- Have nightmares or night terrors (the experience of awakening in a terrified state without recollection of a dream) that interrupt your sleep.
- Sleep-walk often.
- Have been told by someone that you stop breathing during sleep (especially if you have morning headaches or fall asleep easily).

Adapted from University of Michigan Health Service