A Good Night's Sleep is Essential

By Rachel Georgeson, MS, PT

A good night's sleep helps us not only feel alert, energized, and ready for the day, but can also help us make better decisions, improve our memory, and help protect us against a myriad of health issues such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, depression, the common cold, and excessive weight gain. Good sleep can make us smarter and more organized, improve our skills with sporting and newly learned activities, and improve sexual desire. A good night's sleep is as important as proper nutrition and regular exercise.

The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition shows that people consumed an average of 300 fewer calories per day and lost more fat vs. muscle mass than those who got less sleep. If you are tired, you are less likely to hit the gym or go for a walk or run, and you are more likely to turn to food for energy.

Mood, memory, decision-making, and safety can all be affected by our sleep patterns. The Sleep Journal reported that those who slept 7-9 hours per night had fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety, and irritability. Just one night of poor sleep can decrease reaction time, which can have an adverse effect on safety while driving, participating in sports, and performing simple tasks around the house such as cooking and cleaning.

The abilities to retain new information and skills, develop long-term memories, and improve creative processes are improved with good sleep in a process called consolidation. During sleep our brains reorganize and restructure new information so it can be utilized at the appropriate times.

Heart health can also depend on good sleep. Our blood pressure dips when we sleep so this takes stress off of our hearts. Studies show those who get less than 6 hours of sleep per night had higher levels of inflammatory blood proteins, as well as C-reactive proteins, which are associated with heart attack risk. It is also believed that appropriate amounts of sleep help decrease cholesterol levels, which also takes stress off the heart.

Tips for a good night sleep:

1. Go to bed each night and rise in the morning at the same time.
2. Develop a relaxing bedtime ritual that is comforting and stick to it.
3. Avoid having difficult or upsetting conversations prior

to bedtime. This can make you lie awake and think about the situation or try to solve the problem, rather than on relaxing and sleeping.

4. Make sure your bedroom is a comfortable temperature for you; not too hot or too cold.

5. Remove TV's, computers, phones, and any other electronics. The sounds and lights are a stimulant for your brain.

6. Avoid eating heavy meals close to bedtime. If you are hungry, choose foods that have Tryptophan or a healthy protein/carbohydrate combo such as cottage cheese, milk, bananas, or yogurt. Avoid caffeine after 2 pm - this includes chocolate.

7. Watch alcohol consumption. If you do drink alcohol, do so earlier in the evening around 6 pm vs. right before bed. Initially when the body metabolizes alcohol it can make you feel tired, but as the second part of alcohol metabolism occurs, it can cause arousal, waking you up from sleep.

8. Regular exercise is beneficial in many ways, but vigorous exercises are better for the body early in the morning or early afternoon. Evening exercises should be more relaxing, such as yoga or stretching.

9. Make sure you get adequate sunlight exposure. Sunlight helps our normal sleep-wake cycles or circadian rhythm.