11-2009

Pillow Talk

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Unfortunately, people who are chronically sleep deficient often don’t realize that they are, because they have become so accustomed to feeling so blah. Many Americans, especially college students, average less than six hours of sleep a night. Twenty percent of college students polled said they pull an all-nighter at least once a month.

Sleep deprivation can hurt one’s academic performance. A tired brain is slower, less efficient, less productive, more forgetful and makes more mistakes. Nodding off during class as well as going through the day low on energy, feeling cloudy-headed and tired does not show the best use of tuition dollars. Fatigue caused by sleep deprivation decreases blood flow to the frontal cortex where discernment, initiative, creativity, judgment and other decision-making functions transpire. A person experiencing a period of 24 hours of wakefulness has the cognitive function and reaction time equivalent to someone with a blood alcohol level of 0.1 percent.

The cumulative long-term effects of sleep loss are associated with a wide range of deleterious health consequences. Lack of sleep decreases your ability to handle stress and lowers your immune defenses, thereby increasing your risk of colds and infections. Sleep deprivation can raise your risk of heart disease, stroke, chronic anxiety and depression, cancer, obesity, diabetes and impaired blood sugar levels, and other health problems.

Women who slept less than five hours a night were 45 percent more likely to have heart problems than women who slept eight hours. In a ten-year study, persons who got five hours of sleep or less were more than twice as likely to develop hypertension as those who got seven to eight hours a night. In another study, risk of hypertension increased 37 percent for every hour sleep was reduced.

A chronic loss of sleep can almost double the risk of obesity. A loss of sleep can cause the hormones that control appetite to get out of balance. Sleep deprived people may increase their caloric consumption by as much as 15 percent, setting the stage for weight gain. The hormone ghrelin stimulates appetite, while leptin signals the brain when you are full. Sleep deprivation causes leptin levels to drop, so you don’t feel as satisfied after eating, while ghrelin levels rise, so you want to eat more.

Chronic loss of sleep may impair insulin secretion by 20 to 30 percent. Adults who reported five hours of sleep or less were 2.5 times more likely to have diabetes compared with those getting seven to eight hours per night. After only one week, healthy young men who slept only four hours a night developed insulin and blood sugar levels characteristic of pre-diabetes.

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