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PRESS RELEASE

For More Information:

ELLEN G. DUYSSEN

Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health

University of Nebraska Medical Center

College of Public Health, Room 3035

984388 Nebraska Medical Center

Omaha, NE 68198-4388

402.552.3394

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

By UNMC, Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, Omaha, NE

SLEEP: YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO LOSE IT

Fifty years ago, adults averaged between 8 and 8 ½ hours of sleep each night. Today, that number is down to 7 or 7.5 hours.

Hectic lifestyles and advances in technology - such as in-home entertainment, computers, cell phones, etc. – have probably played a role in keeping people up longer in the evening. And due to how LED (light-emitting diodes) lighting from our devices and in-home use of LED bulbs affect our body's circadian rhythms, we may not feel sleepy even when we know it's past our bedtime.

LED lights produce blue wavelengths. During the day, this can help boost attention, reaction times, and mood. However, exposure to light suppresses our body's natural secretion of melatonin, a hormone that influences our circadian rhythms. Melatonin levels in our blood increase during evening hours, causing us to feel drowsy.

When we are exposed to bright light, our melatonin production is directly inhibited. Not only do we feel we don't need to sleep, some studies have shown that lower melatonin levels may be associated with cancer.

“When we don't get enough sleep, we are at risk for so many health problems,” Susan Harris, University of Nebraska Extension Educator – Rural Health, Wellness and Safety, says. “Adequate sleep has a positive impact on our metabolism, so lack of sleep can actually lead to obesity. When we get enough sleep, it helps us deal with stress, we tend to have a better mood and a higher energy level.

Adequate sleep generally causes us to live longer, enhances our memory and makes us more creative. Our appearance improves when we get between 8 and 9 hours of sleep. Sleep researchers know we also have fewer food cravings, are protected from cancer and dementia and are less susceptible to illnesses like colds and flu.

“When we're adequately rested, we have less risk of heart attack, stroke and diabetes,” Harris says. “Our cognitive abilities improve and our ability to maintain information that we've learned is also increased.”

On the farm, it's easy to become sleep deprived due to the hectic nature of seasons such as calving, planting and harvest. The unpredictability of daily farm activities can also lead to long hours and less sleep.

In her research and through interviewing sleep experts and specialists, Harris has learned that there are three important keys to support the proper function of our circadian rhythm.

“Believe it or not, getting up at the same time each day is one of the most important things a person can do to maintain circadian rhythm function,” she says. “Also, while we often think about staying

warm while we sleep, it's actually necessary for our body to cool down a few degrees when we sleep."

The recommended sleeping temperature for a bedroom is between 60 degrees and 68 degrees (Fahrenheit). This promotes sound sleep and restorative activities during sleep.

"In regard to light, follow the sun," Harris says. "In the morning, awaken to bright light and during the evening dim the lights."

Among the important activities that occur while we sleep are detoxification, repair of traumatized muscles (including our heart), and support for cognitive functions that help us retain information we acquired during daytime hours.

"Without adequate sleep, we tend to make poor decisions and our physical actions may be clumsy," Harris says. "Studies have revealed that adolescents in a farm environment are two to three times more likely to be injured if they're sleep deprived. Adequate sleep time for adolescents is between 9 and 10 hours. It's not uncommon for this age group to regularly experience less than seven hours of sleep."

Children between the ages of seven and eight, who get less than eight hours of sleep per night, are more likely to be hyperactive, inattentive and impulsive.

Sleep studies have also demonstrated that being awake for extended periods of time causes an individual to react as those they were intoxicated. Going without sleep for 21 hours affects bodily functions in the same manner as a blood alcohol content level of .08, the legal intoxication level.

"If you're up all night, it will affect your body as though you are highly intoxicated," Harris says. "If you have a night where you don't get any sleep, don't climb into your tractor the next morning."

Some causes of insomnia include:

- Snoring
- Restless leg syndrome (RLS)
- Frequent trips to the bathroom
- Lack of bright light exposure during the daytime
- Underlying medical or physical issues
- Food/drink consumed before bedtime
- Lack of physical activity during the day
- “Chatter in the head” – can’t stop thoughts

Adults who get less than six hours of sleep per night are five times more likely to be obese and have a 56% increase in risk for Type 2 diabetes.

Sleepiness accounts for the highest number of fatal single-car run-off-the-road car accidents, with up to 6,000 fatal crashes each year that may be caused by drowsy drivers.

“Each year, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that 100,000 police-reported crashes involve drowsy driving,” Harris says.

While over-the-counter (OTC) sleep-inducing products are readily available, Harris warns that they aren’t a substitute for “real sleep.”

“The next-day drowsiness or ‘hangover effect’ can result in impaired balance and driving performance,” Harris says. “Those who regularly use these types of products may experience dizziness, constipation, and may become dependent on the product.”

Harris points out that the ingredients in OTC sleep products are the same as those found in antihistamine products.

Tips for improving sleep habits include:

- Get direct sunlight or photo therapy light between 6 AM and 8 AM

- Start dimming lights indoors at sunset or a couple hours prior to bedtime
- Eat unprocessed foods and drink plenty of water
- Limit caffeine intake to mornings
- Stop watching TV, using a computer or other devices at least one hour before bedtime

Find additional tips and recommendations at:
Go.unl.edu/sleeptips.

“We all have everyday priorities,” Harris says. “We’re conscientious about eating healthy and getting exercise. We do what we need to manage our family and home, our farm, and our businesses. We need to ensure that adequate sleep is part of that daily routine.”

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