



Maintain and Stay Sane through the Holidays Campaign



Week two focus: Getting plenty of restful sleep

ZZZZZZ....Wake Up!! Rise and Shine...Are You Getting Enough Sleep?

Poor sleep habits are among the most common problems encountered in our society. We stay up too late and get up too early. We interrupt our sleep with drugs, chemicals and work, and we over stimulate ourselves with late-night activities such as television and computer. From having occasional difficulty sleeping to insomnia, there is a lot you can do to get a better night's sleep, feel refreshed when you awake, and remain alert throughout the day. It is called **“sleep hygiene”** and refers to those practices, habits, and environmental factors that are critically important for sound sleep. And most of it is under your control.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, 50% of Americans are sleep deprived, one third of the population has chronic insomnia, and at least 50% of all insomnia is stress-related. Additionally, a survey conducted by the same Foundation found that over 60% of Americans suffer from poor sleep quality (insomnia) resulting in everything from falling asleep on the job and absenteeism to marital problems and car accidents.

It is important to realize that not getting the proper amount of and the best quality sleep may have serious short-term and long-term consequences. Many studies have shown that sleep deprivation adversely affects performance and alertness. Reducing sleep by as little as one and one-half hours for just one night reduces daytime alertness by about one-third. Excessive daytime sleepiness impairs memory and the ability to think and process information, and carries a substantially increased risk of sustaining an occupational injury. Long-term sleep deprivation, from sleep disorders like apnea, has recently been implicated in high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke.



Psychological stressors such as deadlines, the economy, marital conflict, job crises, and the holidays may prevent us from falling asleep or wake us up from sleep throughout the night. It takes time to “turn off” all the noise from the day. If you work right up to the time you turn out the lights, or are reviewing all the day's events and planning tomorrow, it is virtually impossible to just “flip a switch” and drop off to a blissful night's sleep.



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A pre-sleep ritual should be developed to break the connection between all the stress and bedtime. These rituals can be as short as ten minutes or as long as an hour. Some find relief in making a list of all the stressors or concerns of the day, along with a plan to deal with them. Combining this with a period of relaxation, perhaps by reading something light, meditating, or taking a hot bath can also help with better sleep. And, do not look at the clock when you are in bed. That activates the brain to start calculating time and wakes you even more. If possible, cover up your alarm clock or turn it away at bedtime so you don't see it during the night.

Social or recreational drugs like caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol may have a larger impact on your sleep than you realize. Caffeine, which can stay in your system as long as 14 hours, increases the number of times you awaken at night and decreases the total amount of sleep time. This may subsequently affect daytime anxiety and performance. The effects of nicotine are similar to those of caffeine, with a difference being that at low doses, nicotine tends to act as a sedative, while at high doses it causes arousals during sleep.

Alcohol may initially sedate you, making it easier to fall asleep; however, as it is metabolized and cleared from your system during sleep, it causes arousals that can last as long as two to three hours after it has been eliminated. These arousals disturb sleep, often causing intense dreaming, sweating, and headaches. Smoking, while drinking caffeine and alcohol, can interact to affect your sleep dramatically. These sleep disturbances may be most apparent upon awakening, feeling sleepy, groggy or hung-over.



As stated earlier, sleep hygiene is the term given by sleep researchers to describe one's sleep environment, and bedroom habits. It is important to make an overall commitment to healthy, restorative sleep. Although many of the following sleep hygiene tips may seem like common sense, it is surprising how many points are ignored or forgotten by so many of us. Following these tips should help you relax, fall asleep, stay asleep, and get better sleep so that you wake up refreshed, alert and take on the day:

- Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day – even on weekends. This will help keep your biological clock or circadian rhythm in sync. If you sleep more on the weekends than during the week – and many of us do – this indicates that you have a “sleep debt”. A sleep debt accumulates when you do not get enough sleep. The only way to reduce the debt is to sleep as much as your body needs every night. Experts suggest that even if you cannot fall asleep at an exact time, you should go to bed and turn out the lights at the same time each night.



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- Avoid napping during the day as this will throw off one's circadian rhythms thus ensuring that they will most likely not sleep through the night. As tempting as this might be, if you suffer from insomnia resist the urge to "cut a few logs" until it's time to go to bed.
- Avoid alcohol 4-6 hours before bedtime. Although alcohol is a depressant and may help you fall asleep, 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.
- Avoid caffeine 4-6 hours before bedtime. Caffeine is also a stimulant and is present in coffee, soda, tea, chocolate, and various over-the-counter medications. Caffeine is in fact a drug – the most used drug in the world! A substance in caffeine causes an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, stimulating the stress response. You do not want to do this in the evening hours before you go to bed. If you have problems sleeping, consider consuming no caffeine after 4:00 pm giving your body time to detox from this stimulant. The body takes 8-12 hours to metabolize caffeine's effects in the body.
- A light snack may be sleep-inducing, but a heavy meal too close to bedtime interferes with sleep. Stay away from protein and stick to carbohydrates or dairy products. Milk contains the amino acid L-tryptophan, which has been shown in research to help people go to sleep. With diminished evening light, the body metabolism begins to slow down, including a slight decrease in body temperature, a factor necessary for quality sleep. Eating right before bed not only throws off the body's internal clock, the digestion process requires energy and this energy creates body heat, rather than decreasing it. While eating may serve as a way to calm emotions, eating close to bedtime interferes with the sleep hormones. It is also associated with increased weight gain.
- Sleep experts and exercise physiologists both agree that physical activity, primarily cardiovascular exercise, promotes quality sleep. This type of exercise is known for flushing the stress hormones that are produced from non-physical stress out of the body.
- Create an ideal sleep ambiance by minimizing noise, light, and temperature extremes during sleep with ear plugs, window blinds, or a warm down comforter or air conditioner. Even the slightest nighttime noises or luminescent lights (the digital alarm clock) can disrupt the quality of your sleep. Try to keep the bedroom at a cool, comfortable temperature.
- Avoid watching television, eating, checking email on the wireless, talking on the cell phone, playing video games and discussing emotional issues in bed. The bed should not be used as an office, workroom or recreation room. The bed should be used for sleep and making love (sex) only. It is difficult to fall asleep if the body associates the bed with anything other than these two activities.
- Relax before bedtime. Stress not only can make you miserable, it can wreak havoc on your sleep. Develop some kind of pre-sleep calming ritual to break the connection between all the day's stress and bedtime.



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Good sleep hygiene can have a tremendous impact upon getting better sleep. You should wake up feeling refreshed and alert, and you should generally not feel sleepy during the day. If this is not the case, poor sleep hygiene may be the culprit, but it is also very important to consider that you may have an unrecognized sleep disorder. Many sleep disorders go unrecognized for years, leading to unnecessary suffering, poor quality of life, accidents, and great expense. Since it is clear how critical sound sleep is to your health and well-being, if you are having prolonged periods of not sleeping well, see your doctor or a sleep specialist.

Just imagine what a wonderful world it would be if more people slept like a baby and experienced a restful night's sleep on a regular basis! Sweet dreams!



For more information, resources, or a presentation on sleep, sleep hygiene, or other wellness related topics at your department or agency, contact me at lisa.marzoli@anthem.com or (603) 695-7559.

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