The Importance of Sleep

Approximately 31% of Montanans report not getting enough sleep. This statistic is worrisome, since getting enough quality sleep every night helps to maintain and improve health.

WHY IS SLEEP SO IMPORTANT?

Sleep is essential to physical and mental health, as it helps body and mind recover and rejuvenate from stressors of everyday life. As a result, when we sleep well, research suggests we are more energetic, happier, and able to better concentrate.

HOW DOES A BODY KNOW WHEN TO SLEEP?

Human beings are built to be active during the day and asleep at night. Sleep patterns are regulated by circadian rhythms. Circadian rhythms are internally driven cycles that work like a 24-hour clock, telling when we should sleep and when we should wake up. At night, our brains produce melatonin, a hormone that helps with timing circadian rhythms. If we don't get enough quality sleep, internal processes may be disrupted, which can negatively affect sleep quality.

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO WE NEED?

Although the average adult needs at least seven hours of sleep per night, some people may need more to feel fully rested. In addition to quantity of sleep, quality of sleep is critical. To get quality sleep, our bodies must progress through the sleep cycle, composed of four separate sleep stages. Sleep scientists think that each sleep stage serves a different purpose. If we do not properly cycle through the four stages, our bodies are unable to get high-quality rest. Some signs of not getting quality sleep include:

- Feeling tired despite having slept long enough
- Having difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep
- Waking up repeatedly through the night
- Snoring or gasping for air while sleeping

Photo: John L. Hawley, MSU Extension

- Needing an alarm clock to wake up

- Falling asleep within five minutes

- Feeling groggy or dozing off during daily activities

- Feeling irritable, anxious, or having a difficult time paying attention during the daytime

Did you know age impacts how much sleep is needed in a 24-hour period? Refer to the age groups below for the recommended number of hours.

Age	Hours
Infant (ages 4–12 months)	12–16
Toddler (ages 1–2)	11–14
Preschool (ages 3–5)	10–13
Elementary (ages 6–12)	9–12
Teenagers (ages 13–18)	8–10
Adults (ages 18–65)	7–9
Adults (ages 65 and older)	7–8

Reference: CDC – How Much Sleep Do I Need? – Sleep and Sleep Disorders. (2017, March 02). *https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.html*

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Healthy sleep promotes peak physical performance and productivity. Because sleep helps bodies rejuvenate from daily stressors, with enough quality sleep, we are better able to fight off infection and reduce the risk of developing a chronic disease, such as Type 2 diabetes or cardiovascular disease. Getting enough quality sleep also helps maintain a healthy weight, which lowers the risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases.

MENTAL HEALTH

Lack of sleep can negatively affect behavior, mood, memory, and emotions. When we have not slept well enough, we may find ourselves being forgetful and making simple mistakes. Not getting enough quality sleep may also increase levels of anxiety and depression. On the other hand, sleeping well sharpens the mind, assists in decision-making, helps us excel at work and school, and helps balance moods and emotions.

SAFETY

Lack of sleep can also impair our ability to function or react in potentially dangerous situations. Driving a vehicle, operating heavy machinery, or performing other potentially risky tasks can be more dangerous while drowsy.

HOW CAN WE SLEEP BETTER?

There are many ways to adjust daily lives to establish better sleep habits, including following a consistent sleep schedule, making bedrooms as comfortable as possible, avoiding doing things other than sleep in bed, and changing our diet to promote better sleep. Here are some daily changes to make to improve sleep quality:

- Dim lights in the house 1-2 hours before bedtime.

- Go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time each morning.

- Set an early enough bedtime to get the recommended hours of sleep.

- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine.

- Make sure the bedroom is quiet, clutter-free, and dark.

- Set the bedroom to a comfortable, cool temperature. Sleep experts recommend a room temperature near 65°F.

- Only use the bed for sleeping. Try to avoid activities in bed such as watching movies, looking at a phone, or doing work.

- Avoid using electronic devices at least 1-2 hours before bedtime. Exposure to bright light can affect the ability to fall asleep and disturb the natural circadian rhythm.

- Avoid eating large meals before bedtime.

- Limit fluid intake before bedtime.

- Avoid drinking alcohol. It may help to fall asleep, but can disrupt the natural sleep cycle.

- Avoid consuming caffeine, nicotine, and other stimulants within eight hours of bedtime.

For more information on other steps to take, sleep disorders, and a sleep diary template, read the MSU Extension MontGuide *Sleep: Its Health Benefits, How Much You Need, and Strategies to Get More* (MT202105HR).

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