When it is time to get up in the morning, do you beg yourself for another 5 minutes? Do other family members need repeated coaxing to get out of bed? This morning ritual is not much fun, but the bigger issue is whether you and other family members are getting enough sleep to be productive and healthy, and avoid accidents.

How much is enough?

Many adults get 7 hours of sleep each night, and they think that is enough. But, research shows that your work performance, driving, ability to cope with stress, patience with your kids and co-workers -- just about every aspect of your daily life -- is harmed because 7 hours is simply not enough sleep to do your best. Just one more hour of sleep each night would mean you are less likely to lose your temper, less likely to have a car accident, and less likely to make a mistake at work.

If you’re not sure if you need more sleep here’s a clue: people who have enough sleep at night do not nap during the day, even during a boring lecture or TV program.

Between the ages of 10 and 17, kids stay up later each night, but they have to get up earlier because middle school and high school schedules start earlier than elementary schools. According to Mary Carskadon, a researcher from Brown University, one in four high school students report 6.5 hours of sleep or less on average, but they really need more than 9 hours of sleep.

How does she know? In one study, when given no cues about what time it was, 10-year olds slept 9 hours and 20 minutes each night and woke up naturally. As the children got older, and their "biological rhythms" changed, they were more alert at night but still slept for the same amount of time, and they struggled to stay awake during the day.
Sleeping late on weekends helps children and adults make up for their lack of sleep during the week, but it can also make it more difficult to go to sleep on Sunday night. It’s like changing time zones every week. Sleep experts recommend keeping your weekend sleep schedule no more than 2 hours different from your weekday sleep schedule. For example, if you need to get up at 7 am during the week, get up by 9 am on weekends.

So, how do we make sure that we get enough sleep?

Many teens and adults, depend on caffeine, nicotine, and other stimulants to stay awake. Colas have caffeine, but some sodas, such as Mountain Dew and Red Bull, have even more. By the end of the day, many children and adults are wide-awake. They go to sleep too late and then need caffeine the next morning – starting the cycle all over again.

Parents need to set consistent rules about caffeine consumption and about bedtime. Avoid caffeine for at least 5 hours before bedtime – more, if possible. Take TVs and computers out of your child’s bedroom if you want to control when they go to bed. If you enforce these rules with young children, it will be easier to maintain the rules as your child grows up. And it also helps to enforce the rules every day. Every time you give in just makes your children more likely to test those limits when you least want them to.

How does lack of sleep affect us?

Learning

Students are less able to pay attention or remember what they are learning in school when they do not get enough sleep. That’s true for what you learn at work, too.

Safety

Lack of sleep has a similar effect as alcohol on judgment, reaction time, and driving skill. And as with alcohol, the teen or adult who is impaired from lack of sleep may not realize it. In fact, many of us who do not get enough sleep experience “sleep attacks” – unintentionally falling asleep for a few seconds. Sleep attacks might mean you miss some information if you’re sitting in class or watching TV. They can be fatal if you are driving.

Smoking, Drinking, and Drugs.

The impaired judgment that can cause car accidents also can result in making bad choices. As we all know, children can be easily swayed by peer pressure, and lack of sleep makes them even less able to “just say no” or think ahead about negative consequences.

Conflicts with Family and Friends.

Tired babies are cranky, and research shows that tired teens and adults are, too. This can contribute to constant tension and arguments between children and other family members, as well as road rage, gang fights, family violence, and other serious problems.

David Dinges, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted a study that allowed adults to sleep only 6 hours per night. He found that after a week the adults in the study were just as impaired as adults getting 8 hours of sleep per night who had gone without sleep for 48 hours straight. Since teens need more sleep than adults, Dinges believes that teens would be even more impaired.

“Every time you give in just makes your children more likely to test those limits when you least want them to.”

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