

# Wellness EMPLOYEE report



## Top ten bedtime tips

- Maintain a regular bed and wake time schedule, including on weekends.
- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine, such as soaking in a hot bath, and then reading a book or listening to soothing music.
- Create a sleep-conducive environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.
- Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows.
- Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex.
- Finish eating at least 2-3 hours before your regular bedtime.
- Exercise regularly. It's best to complete your workout at least a few hours before bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine (such as coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate) close to bedtime. It can keep you awake.
- Avoid nicotine (such as cigarettes, tobacco products). Used close to bedtime, this can lead to poor sleep.
- Avoid alcohol close to bedtime.

Source: National Sleep Foundation

## The ABCs of getting some ZZZs

Are you getting a good night's sleep?

The old adage that every now and again we could all do with 'a good night's sleep' is sometimes easier said than done. At a time when poor sleeping habits and fatigue are all too common in today's fast-paced, multi-tasking society, an estimated 3.3 million Canadians over the age of 15 are said to suffer from some form of sleep disorder.

Almost 20 percent of those who struggle with sleeplessness average less than five hours of sleep a night – considerably less than the six to ten hours of sleep that most adults need. Perhaps the best measure of how much sleep we each need is the amount that makes us feel 'rested'. Unfortunately, sleep tends to take a backseat to late night television

and increasingly busy lives, and most of us ignore the importance of getting that good night's sleep, only to wonder why we function less effectively (and often more irritably) during the day, and why our immune system often feels short-changed.

"When you don't get the kind of sleep your body needs, you feel like someone beat you up while you were asleep – and yet you have to wake up refreshed the next day and be ready to go," says one young woman who has battled poor sleeping for years. She says, "My brain doesn't know when to quit working. And then you feel cranky, shaky, out of breath and are unable to concentrate."

## Thieves in the night: Common sleep snatchers

**Insomnia** is a difficulty in *falling* asleep and *staying* asleep, and is the most common type of sleep disorder. It may last for a period of days (*transient insomnia*, such as the sleeplessness one might feel in advance of an event or a test), or it can be long-lasting and require some form of medical treatment (*chronic insomnia*). Most medical practitioners agree that insomnia is a symptom of a larger problem, and have made the connection between insomnia and stress, as well as factors such as work scheduling (particularly shift-work). Less obvious contributors include being middle-aged, overweight, drinking alcohol or smoking. More than a fifth of those who suffer from insomnia have been previously diagnosed with asthma, arthritis, rheumatism, back problems or diabetes. Any of these factors can interfere with Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep – REM is the deepest portion of a person's sleep – the 'dream state' when the body is at its most relaxed.

Research indicates that approximately 10 percent of young people age 15 to 24 have sleep difficulties – a figure that rises significantly as people get older. Financial stress, work, childcare responsibilities and looking after older parents are all notably stressful factors that account for tiredness in the 45 to 64 age category, while the high prevalence of insomnia among seniors can be attributed to poorer health, as opposed to one's advanced age.

**Obstructive Sleep Apnea** is a serious, potentially life-threatening, breathing disorder that has been linked to an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. Irregular breathing occurs when a person's neck muscles relax, and this leads to multiple, brief awakenings during the night. Sleep apnea is more common in men than women, particularly those who are middle-aged and overweight, and most people are completely unaware that they are gasping for breath at night. Treatment

## Diagnosing sleep disorders

Anemia, an underactive thyroid and depression are just some of the medical conditions that may cause sleeplessness at night and excessive tiredness during the day. If this fatigue is interfering with your work or family life, check with your family doctor – you might have an underlying medical condition that can be diagnosed (and treated effectively) by visiting a sleep specialist who may conduct one or more of the following tests:

- An all-night *polysomnograph*, requiring the patient to sleep in a designated lab and allowing equipment to record the different stages of sleep that are experienced.
- A *Multiple Sleep Latency Test* (MSLT), allowing the patient to nap with similar testing conducted during the day. The amount of time the patient takes to fall asleep is measured, as is the time it takes for the patient to enter REM sleep.
- A *pupillograph*, which measures the diameter of the pupil in the eye as an indicator of drowsiness.

may include sleep-devices that can reposition the tongue or jaw in order to maintain a person's airflow during sleep

**Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS)** is characterized by an unpleasant tingling or itching sensation in the legs and feet causing discomfort and sleeplessness. Most common in elderly people, RLS episodes last between five minutes and as long as two hours. A by-product of RLS is *Periodic Limb Movement*, which includes waking up frequently, unknowingly from involuntary contractions of legs and arms.

**Narcolepsy** includes sudden and uncontrollable sleep that occurs in the middle of a conversation or meal. It can be accompanied by hallucinations, excessive daytime sleepiness or a loss of muscle control ranging from a feeling of general weakness, to a complete body collapse.

With 1 in 7 Canadians reporting significant sleep problems, there are almost as many types of sleep disorders as there are causes. Research indicates that people who are overtired are two and a half times more likely to be in a car accident, and each year in North America over 500,000 car accidents can be attributed to sleepiness.

If external or environmental factors (such as stress) are unavoidable and affecting

your sleep, or if you find yourself sleepy when you should be awake and alert, you may want to consider modifications in lifestyle, diet and exercise. If these don't help, it's important to talk to your family doctor, especially if you're considering taking medication to help you sleep. Over-the-counter sleeping pills, for example, can often ease cases of short-term insomnia, but their effectiveness is limited in treating chronic insomnia. Although we often think that by living on less sleep we'll have more time to spend in other areas, the truth is that we only end up feeling tired, run down and ultimately, the quality of our time at work and play is less rewarding and less productive.

Sources: Sleep/Wake Disorders Canada; Canadian Sleep Society; National Sleep Foundation; Sleep Medicine; Sleepnet; Canadian Health Network; Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, catalogue 11-001-XIE, Wednesday, November 16, 2005: 2.

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