



Lack of Sleep Impairs Brain, Promotes Disease

Psychiatrist and Sleep Expert Dr. Alex Dimitriu Offers Tips for Healthier ZZZZ's

“To sleep, perchance to dream, ay, there’s the rub.” Unfortunately, the lament of Shakespeare’s Hamlet remains all too true for as many as 70 million Americans who experience some type of sleeping disorder, says noted psychiatrist and sleep medicine specialist, Alex Dimitriu, MD.

“Getting a sufficient amount of sleep is closely associated with good physical and mental health and overall quality of life. Most adults require between seven hours and nine hours of sleep daily,” says Dr. Dimitriu, founder of Menlo Park Psychiatry and Sleep Medicine center. Yet, the American Sleep Association (ASA) indicates that 35 percent of adults in the United States report achieving fewer than seven hours of sleep a night.

Dr. Dimitriu notes that the key “red flags” for a sleep problem, due to insufficient time spent in bed or some form of sleep disturbance, are: waking up feeling tired and unrefreshed, daytime drowsiness, complaints from a spouse or partner about one’s excessive snoring, gasping for breath when awakening, inability to fall asleep even when tired, and having an underlying medical condition like chronic pain, anxiety or asthma that disrupts sleep or makes sleeping difficult.

Additional, “softer red flags” indicating a sleep problem include: irritability, often either a state of exhaustion, alternating with adrenaline and anxiety, depression manifested as a lack of joy or loss of interest), which sometimes does not improve with medications, low energy despite a desire to do things, impaired concentration, and short term memory problems which can look like ADHD, or Alzheimer’s for some, heavy use or dependence on caffeine, “burnout”, and weight gain.

Most common sleep disorders are:

- Insomnia (inability to fall asleep or remain asleep), affecting an estimated 40 percent of Americans during any 12-month period

- Obstructive sleep apnea (causing breathing to stop multiple times during sleep)
- Narcolepsy (falling asleep suddenly and without warning and being unable to regulate one’s sleep-wake cycle)
- Restless leg syndrome, and
- Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep behavior disorder.

“Fortunately, we have effective care options for sleep disorders,” Dr. Dimitriu says. Treatments can include any combination of medications, cognitive behavioral therapy for controlling negative thoughts and worries that are keeping a person awake, relaxation techniques, light therapy, and lifestyle changes to minimize daytime stresses and bad habits affecting sleep.

Dr. Dimitriu advises patients who are experiencing sleep problems for a month or more to seek out the assistance of a health care professional. That’s because chronic sleep deprivation puts individuals at higher risk of becoming obese, having a weakened immunity system and developing chronic and life-threatening disorders, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, stroke – even lung cancer, according to a 2017 study.

Sleep also is essential to personal safety. “Insufficient sleep can affect a person’s overall functioning, performance and reaction time,” Dr. Dimitriu explains. The ASA, for example, reports that drowsy driving is responsible for 1,550 motor vehicle-related deaths and 40,000 nonfatal injuries annually.

Most important is the strong link between sleep and brain health, Dr. Dimitriu states.

In fact, a small, preliminary study conducted by the National Institutes of Health and published in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in April 2018 identifies sleep disturbances as being potentially linked to a higher risk for Alzheimer’s disease. Earlier research, published in 2017, shows a connection

between sleep deprivation and dementia.

“We have long been aware of the close association between sleep problems and mental diseases like anxiety, depression, even eating disorders” Dr. Dimitriu says. “But, this connection may be a case of ‘What came first, the chicken or the egg?’ As doctors, we have suspected that mental illness leads to sleep problems, but the latest research is offering increasing evidence that failure to get the right amount of sleep may give rise to psychiatric disorders.”

In fact, sleep is essential to helping the brain recover from the stresses and work of the previous day. “The brain uses sleep time to organize and process information, store memories and check and maintain its wiring. Research has demonstrated that communication between different parts of the brain is abnormal in sleep-deprived patients,” Dr. Dimitriu says.

For those who do not have a physical or psychiatric disorder, a good night’s rest may be simply a few lifestyle adjustments away. Dr. Dimitriu recommends taking these steps for better sleep:

- Maintain a regular sleep schedule.
- Before bedtime, limit consumption of caffeine, chocolate, sugary foods and other products that promote wakefulness.
- Avoid alcohol, which can impair sleep.
- Turn off the laptop, the high-tech mobile phone and the television dramas to allow time to relax before going to bed.
- If overweight, lose the extra pounds.
- Exercise regularly. Exercise helps reduce stress and anxiety.

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