Sleep is critical to overall health and well-being. It's one of the three pillars of health, alongside diet/nutrition and exercise/activity. Because sleep plays key roles in nearly every regulatory process in your body, lack of good-quality sleep can lead to a long list of bad outcomes.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society recently jointly recommended that a typical healthy adult needs at least seven hours of sleep daily for optimal health and functioning. Studies show insufficient sleep leads to cardiovascular and metabolic symptoms like weight gain and obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, inflammation, heart attack and stroke. It is also implicated in depression, stress, substance abuse, accidents, injuries, inability to focus and decreased performance.

Research from our group and others shows that people who do not get enough sleep are more likely to miss work, call in sick, underperform and be unproductive, and spend more on health care due to poor health. When people trade sleep time for work time, their work suffers.

There are three steps to better sleep.

First, get screened for a sleep disorder. Up to 10 percent of the adult U.S. population meet the criteria for an insomnia disorder. The recommended first-line treatment for insomnia does not involve medications and usually outperforms sleeping pills.

Second, practice healthy sleep habits; that is, "sleep hygiene." Keep a regular schedule; avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol at night; keep your bedroom at a comfortable temperature; remove electronic media (including the TV) from the bedroom; avoid naps; and get plenty of exercise during the day. These may not fix a sleep problem, but they will help prevent one from developing.

Finally, set realistic goals and don't try to make too many large changes to your lifestyle at once. Instead of trying for another hour of sleep, start by finding an extra 15 minutes. Allow yourself time to wind down at night. Sometimes, tracking your sleep schedule in a log or diary can help you notice patterns and stay on a regular schedule.

Sleep is an important part of health and daytime functioning. Sleep is not unproductive time; during sleep, your body is very busy doing what it needs to do to keep you fit, functional and focused. It's time to make sleep a priority.

To learn more about health and well-being services, connect with Life & Work Connections by calling 621-2493 or visiting lifework.arizona.edu [1].

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