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Sue Ann Says: Make Sleep a Priority...Your Health Depends on It

I don't sleep much. Never have. I suppose it doesn't help that my dog, Emmy, snores next to me all night long; or that my clock radio begins blaring at 4:00 a.m. Anyway, I'm used to it! But during a recent staff meeting, I noticed some of us were yawning - more than once - which led us into a spirited discussion about sleep...or lack thereof. We decided to do some research and look into what happens when sleep eludes us. And the findings were eye-opening!

Why is sleep so important, especially to women?

According to the Harvard Women's Health Watch, lack of sleep affects:

- **Learning and memory:** Sleep helps the brain commit new information to memory through a process called memory consolidation. In studies, people who'd slept after learning a task did better on tests later.
- **Metabolism and weight:** Chronic sleep deprivation may cause weight gain by affecting the way our bodies process and store carbohydrates, and by altering levels of hormones that affect our appetite.
- **Safety:** Sleep debt contributes to a greater tendency to fall asleep during the daytime. These lapses may cause falls and mistakes such as medical errors, air traffic mishaps, and road accidents.
- **Mood:** Sleep loss may result in irritability, impatience, inability to concentrate, and moodiness. Too little sleep can also leave you too tired to do the things you like to do.
- **Cardiovascular health:** Serious sleep disorders have been linked to hypertension, increased stress hormone levels, and irregular heartbeat. [According to new research women have an increased risk of heart trouble when they get less than eight hours of sleep. Experts found that inflammatory markers (indicators of heart disease) changed quite a bit depending on the amount of sleep a woman got - but sleep duration had no impact on these levels in men.]
- **Disease:** Sleep deprivation alters immune function, including the activity of the body's killer cells. Keeping up with sleep may also help fight cancer.

How much sleep do we need?

I spoke with Ruth Benca, MD, PhD, professor in the departments of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and director of the Center for Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research at the UW. She told me it varies from person to person, but on average most of us need at least seven hours. "You need enough sleep so that you feel awake and alert upon rising. If you find yourself nodding off in non-stimulating situations or if you're sleeping longer on the weekends, you're not getting enough sleep." She also mentioned that if you're getting enough sleep, you shouldn't need an alarm clock to wake up. (I can't even imagine...)

But, it's the recent studies that Dr. Benca suggested we look at about how lack of sleep can increase the risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease, and affect fat loss that really caught our attention.

Sleep loss increases type 2 diabetes and heart disease risk.

A recent study found that people who sleep less than six hours a night may be three times more likely as individuals who got an average of six to eight hours of sleep a night to develop a condition which leads to diabetes and heart disease. According to researchers at the Warwick Medical School and the State University of New York at Buffalo, short sleep duration is associated with an elevated risk of a pre-diabetic state known as incident-impaired fasting glycaemia (IFG). IFG means that your body isn't able to regulate glucose as efficiently as it should. People with IFG have a greater risk of developing type 2 diabetes and are at an increased risk of heart disease and stroke.

Sleep loss limits fat loss.

Cutting back on sleep reduces the benefits of dieting, according to a study performed at the University of Chicago's General Clinical Resource Center (and included a UW-Madison researcher.) Well, geez, there's my problem!

When dieters in the study got a full night's sleep, they lost the same amount of weight as when they slept less. However, when they got adequate sleep more than half of the weight they lost was fat. When they cut back on their sleep, only one-fourth of their weight loss came from fat (muscle was compromised). They also felt hungrier. When sleep was restricted, dieters produced higher levels of ghrelin, a hormone that triggers hunger and reduces energy expenditure.

It's clear that we need to change the way we think about sleep... and the priority we give it in our lives. To get enough sleep isn't a luxury for those with time on their hands; the right amount of sleep is now considered a must for everyone, bringing a huge boost to your health, your mood and so much more. With that, I think I'll go take a nap.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman...

Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, and early detection of diseases that affect women the most; connects individuals to health resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. To learn more, visit wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.