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ADOLESCENT SLEEP

You probably won't be surprised to learn that we sleep a lot less than we did 200 years ago. But you probably didn't know that the result is harmful sleep deprivation among teenagers and young children. So when kids suddenly can't concentrate at school, start failing exams, or worse, start having major accidents it's literally because they're not getting enough sleep.



Too much TV or Computing time can cause adolescent sleep deprivation

GEORGE NEGUS: We now know good sleep is important to good health. But in this hyperactive, electronic cyber age of ours, there's one group who definitely don't get near enough rest. Latest studies show us that kids and teenagers, in fact, are becoming increasingly sleep-deprived. And the end result of all that staying up late can be quite catastrophic. Here's Dr Caroline West.

(FOOTAGE OF GIRL WATCHING TELEVISION)

DR CAROLINE WEST, REPORTER: You're looking at scene being enacted in millions of homes all over the country. Kids and teenagers deep in the nightly electronic ritual. But every one of these activities - studying hard, watching TV, listening to music, gossiping on the phone, playing video games, are all a recipe for sleep deprivation. And for young minds, sleep deprivation means trouble. I don't know about you, but when I was a little kid I was often in bed and reading by 7pm. Even as a teenager, lights were often out by 10pm. But try telling children that in the digital 21st century. Many of the teenagers I know are still up and buzzing at 11pm or 12pm and then they're expected to be up at 7am, bright and early, ready for school. Now, if sleep is food for the brain, then many young Australians are in danger of brain starvation.

DR CHRIS SETON, WESTMEAD CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL: They become overly active and sometimes hyperactive when they're sleep-deprived. So they actually get busier rather than quieter and this, again, makes them less likely to sleep.

DR CAROLINE WEST: So recent research has been looking at what a difference missing out on just half an hour of sleep has on brain function or getting half an hour extra sleep does for kids and teenagers. So how much of that brain food or sleep do children need? According to the latest research, most kids in 3rd Grade and up need around 9 to 10 hours a night to function well. So if your kids are engrossed in the latest fantasy novel or stuck at their

desks late into the night, don't be surprised if they appear to be drowsy and cranky in the mornings. What's less understood is that sleepy kids learn less effectively. They find it harder to concentrate or to behave and perform to the best of their ability. It doesn't take much - just half an hour less sleep a night - to have a marked effect on their learning. In class, sleep-deprived kids can drift off into microsleeps, often missing vital lessons. They don't process new information effectively, their memory is impaired and their attention span shortened. If sleep deprivation becomes a regular pattern, kids are more likely to feel isolated and they have a greater risk of being aggressive, argumentative or just plain naughty. When it comes to teenagers, though, things get even more complicated. The latest research suggests that many teenagers actually need as much, if not more sleep, as their younger brothers and sisters. That's because their brain is still developing, especially in the area known as the prefrontal cortex. Now, this is the part responsible for both cognitive skills like updating memory and dealing with emotions. Teenagers are learning to use these thought processes to help them cope with everyday complex life issues - important things like how to control their feelings and behaviour whilst making plans and decisions about school, relationships and their future. If they're not sleeping enough, it can have a disastrous effect on the decisions they make. And even if they're getting their 9 or 10 hours sleep, don't expect them to be bright and shiny in the mornings. With the physical and hormonal changes that take place in adolescence, there can be a natural time shift in sleeping and waking patterns. The body clocks of teenagers may be set forward an hour or two so they tend to stay up later either studying or just being teenagers. So, naturally, they want to sleep in as well.

DR CHRIS SETON: That means that when they're getting up in the morning they're sleep-deprived, and that happens each weeknight, so they accrue what's called sleep debt. That is, they are owed some sleep. So on the weekends they will often sleep in, which is fine, but they go to bed even later and on Monday they're at their very worst.

DR CAROLINE WEST: So what does this mean for parents and teachers? Well, taking a strong stand the night before can mean that tomorrow is a better day for everyone. Make sure your kids are getting enough sleep - in general, around 9 or 10 hours - and as that's not always possible, encourage them to have catch-up naps or, better still, get them into bed a bit earlier the next night.

DR CHRIS SETON: So simple things like a hot, deep bath, a glass of hot milk, um, some music, prior to bed, done out of bed in a routine way for the same amount of time each night, is very helpful for a child's sleep. Once that routine's in place, you'll then find that you can shift the bedtime by shifting the routine. So if you institute a routine for, say, a month, and you think your child's bedtime's a little bit too late and the child is sleep-deprived, you can then move the bedtime a bit earlier - 10 or 15 minutes a week - by moving the routine the same amount and the body clock or the sleep clock of the child gets fooled into thinking that bedtime is unchanged. So in that way, you can increase or stretch sleep. If you don't do it that way, sleep is very hard to increase, particularly in children, because children are resistant to it.

DR CAROLINE WEST: In fact, the research shows that if you want to improve your kids' memory and reaction rate at school, that extra half an hour can make them brighter, calmer and more effective learners.

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