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March 6, 2007

Most Teens Suffer from Sleep Deprivation

Recently, the start of school time has become a more common debate at both the national and local levels. Since the 1990's, considerable research into the topic of sleep deprivation, especially in teens, has been conducted. The growing body of evidence from sleep research continues to support the argument that adolescents do not get enough sleep, and this is creating problems related to the health, safety, and social and emotional development of young people.

The 2006 poll just released by the National Sleep Foundation reveals that teenagers are not getting enough sleep, and that the problem worsens as adolescents grow older. The findings of the poll indicate that nearly every aspect of a teen's life is adversely affected by insufficient sleep, and that most parents have no idea about their child's sleep requirements. According to the poll,

- At least once a week, 28% of high school students fall asleep in school, 22% fall asleep while doing homework, and 14% oversleep and arrive late to school or miss it entirely.
- Insufficient sleep results in poorer grades.
- 15% of 10th-12th grade drivers drive drowsy at least once a week, and 51% have driven while drowsy during the past year.
- 28% of adolescents report they are too tired to exercise.
- The amount of sleep declines from early adolescence throughout the teen years.

The National Sleep Foundation poll supports the conclusion of numerous studies conducted in the United States and Canada that 9 to 10 hours of sleep is optimal for teens. Unfortunately, teenagers are under considerable pressure to maintain good grades and to participate in extracurricular activities in order to get into college. At the same time, social activities assume increased importance, and many young people also are employed. This situation is further complicated by physiology. Studies have shown that there is a shift during adolescence in the biological clock: teenagers are more alert at night and find it difficult to wake up early in the morning. The biological trigger causing sleepiness slows down in adolescents, making it nearly impossible for them to fall asleep until late at night. Further, the hormonal changes that accompany puberty cause delays in the production of sleep-inducing melatonin in the brain.

The health effects of sleep deprivation are becoming more evident with time. Insufficient sleep affects the growth hormone that is linked to obesity, it impairs the body's ability to use insulin, which can lead to diabetes, and it interferes with the regulation of blood pressure, resulting in hypertension. Lack of sleep contributes to acne and other skin problems, limits the ability to concentrate and learn, leads to inappropriate behavior and depression, and heightens the effect of caffeine and nicotine.

Also, sleepiness reduces reaction time and increases the number of accidental injuries and deaths. In fact, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that 1500 Americans are killed and 71,000 more are injured in traffic crashes related to drowsiness or fatigue annually – more than 50% of these accidents involve drivers age 25 or younger.

As more school boards grapple with the complexities inherent in changing school start times, it is encouraging to learn that when 7 high schools in Minneapolis switched from beginning at 7:15 a.m. to 8:40 a.m., a number of positive changes occurred. These include

- reduced absenteeism;
- fewer students falling asleep in class or while doing homework;
- higher grades achieved;
- fewer symptoms of depression in students.

Given what is now known about sleep deprivation and adolescence, it may be time to rethink the way in which the school day is structured. As we “spring forward” to daylight savings time, we are all reminded of what it is like to lose just one hour of sleep in a week. Yet, the majority of our young people miss out on about 12 hours of sleep each week by the time they are high school seniors.

For tips on helping their children sleep better, parents can consult the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at www.nhlbi.nih.gov (301-496-4236) or Awake in America, Inc. at www.awakeinamerica.org (215-764-6568). Further information about sleep deprivation is available at Spectrum Health at cwww.spectrum-health.org (toll free 866- 989-7999) and the National Sleep Foundation at www.sleepfoundation.org.

Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org (860-721-2822)