

Sleep Hygiene

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As many of you are already aware, women and men with Down syndrome have a much higher rate of Obstructive Sleep Apnea, a disorder causing decreased quality of rest due to halted breathing while asleep. It can lead to excessive daytime sleepiness, chronic fatigue, and possibly more serious health problems.

While it is important to be aware of this potential sleep problem, something that is often overlooked (by people with and without Down syndrome) are the day-to-day sleeping habits known as “sleep hygiene”. Just as good dental hygiene involves a set of planned activities such as brushing and flossing your teeth, choices and plans you make during the day can affect how healthy your night’s sleep ends up being. It is estimated that about half of all patients who come to doctors’ offices admit, when asked, that they have some type of problem sleeping.

One night without good sleep does not have much affect on our performance the following day. Add together a string of bad nights and you start seeing effects. It is hard or impossible to stay awake during the day (especially for “boring/repetitive” tasks), tempers are shorter, creativity suffers, and you can start feeling “run down” all the time.

Here are some suggestions for ways to improve the quality of normal sleep-to have good sleep hygiene:

- 1) Set a daily bedtime and a wake-up time. Stick to this schedule, even on weekends.
- 2) Exercise daily, but not within an hour of bedtime if possible. Late afternoon may be the best.
- 3) No caffeine after lunchtime. It would be best to avoid it altogether (it stays in your system 12 to 15 hours), but this habit is hard to break. Caffeine includes coffee, black tea, soda pop, and, yes, chocolate. Herbal tea is O.K.

- 4) Minimize sleep interruptions-keep noise/light levels at an absolute minimum (snoring roommates can be a problem); make sure the room is not too hot or cold; don't drink a lot of water before bedtime; have a comfortable bed.
- 5) No big meals within 1-2 hours of bedtime. A light snack is O.K.
- 6) No smoking---ever.
- 7) Wind down toward the end of the day. No challenging or upsetting activities (if possible) in the evening. This can mean setting aside time earlier in the day for thinking through difficult issues or problems.
- 8) Avoid taking naps during the day, especially in the evening. If you do nap, nothing longer than 20 to 30 minutes.
- 9) Use your bed only for sleeping. No TV, reading, homework, eating, etc.

As with all people, there will be differences between individuals on the amount of sleep needed (6 to 9 hours per night seems to be the average), what activities help or hinder sleep, and just how much chocolate actually counts as a caffeine risk. It is also normal to have sleeping problems when going through difficult or stressful time in life. If the disturbances continue for weeks, however, it is time to get help.

The direct impact of Down syndrome on sleep is not fully known. There are some characteristics that many with DS may find keep them from sleeping as they could. A group home environment or having roommates may lead to more disruptions of sleep. Sorting through emotional, complex, and stressful issues may take more time and effort leading to increased time lying awake "just thinking". Regular exercise is also lacking for some adults with Down syndrome.

Finally, as every human ages, there are expected changes in sleep habits. Staying asleep is more difficult; older adults wake up more frequently during the night and early morning. The amount of deep sleep is less than in young adults. With these changes comes an increase in daytime sleepiness and napping. Other medical problems can begin to interrupt sleep and the natural body sleep cycles become irregular.

If you suspect someone you know needs help with their sleep hygiene, start keeping track of bedtimes, wake-up times, and the other issues listed above. Try to make some of the sleep hygiene modifications to fit your particular needs.

Good night