Dear Alice,

What are the long-term effects of sleep deprivation?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Whether you’re a busy bee or simply looking to improve your Zzzs, sleep is critical for well-being. Chronic sleep deprivation, or going for extended periods of time with less sleep than the body needs, can lead to a variety of physical and psychological problems. Adults, on average, need anywhere from seven to nine hours of sleep. Not meeting those hours can make people more irritable, less efficient, unable to recall events, and be more accident-prone. Additionally, research on chronic sleep deprivation suggests more serious long-term complications, including:

- **Cognitive problems**: It’s believed that adequate amounts of sleep are essential for storing and maintaining long-term memories. People who are sleep deprived also score worse on cognitive tasks, such as judgment and reaction time. The National Sleep Foundation estimates that as many as 100,000 car accidents a year may be caused by sleep deprivation.
- **Diabetes**: Sleep deprivation can interfere with the body’s ability to regulate insulin production and blood glucose metabolism, potentially increasing the risk of diabetes.
- **Weakened immune system**: Lack of sleep can result in changes to immune response and white blood cell production, which can lead to difficulty in fighting off infections.
- **Obesity**: Some scientists believe that sleep deprivation decreases the production of leptin, a hormone that makes people feel “full” after eating. Without enough leptin, people continue to crave food even after they’ve eaten — leading to overeating and possible weight gain.
A person who gets only a few hours of sleep each night can easily accumulate sleep debt, or the cumulative effect of not getting enough sleep each night. While someone experiencing sleep debt may feel rejuvenated after one night of recovery, they might actually need two full nights of sleep to recover performance, alertness, and usual mood. Short-term consequences of sleep debt can include decreased daytime alertness, impaired memory and cognitive ability, and more than double the risk of sustaining an occupational injury.

If increased demands in your life have forced you to cut back on your Zzzs, it might be a good opportunity to reflect on how you’re spending your time. Are you finding that you don’t have enough time to sleep? Do you schedule your involvement in activities around your sleep or the other way around? How much time do you spend online or on social media? What other factors are impacting your ability to get enough sleep? Taking stock of your schedule and thinking about how you spend your time might highlight areas where your time isn’t being spent in a way that’s consistent with your personal or professional goals. Being more purposeful with your time can provide an opportunity to prioritize sleep and ensure you’re able to get enough of it each night. If you have additional questions about this topic, check out the Sleep category in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

Here’s to catching some Zzzs,

Alice!

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