Get those Z's for Weight Loss Ease!

By Stephanie MacLeay

It's your first semester as a college freshman and for the first time you are on your own. A lot has changed since high school and I am not talking about the awkward dress or tux you wore to junior prom. College life is new and exciting, to downright awesome! No longer a slave to your parents’ "nagging," you are free to make your own decisions and choices. You set the rules and are the boss of you. FREEDOM AT LAST!

This new found freedom however, is double-edged. With it comes a mild to sharp learning curve to the fast-paced environment that your new life demands. Your course load has increased and at times can seem never-ending. Staying up late during the week and weekends is a priority for socializing with friends and a must for school work. This is almost irresistible when combined with unlimited streams of music, videos and late night food options. You find yourself increasingly becoming a night owl, but continue with life the next day with a "no-biggie" attitude. While it may not seem like a big deal now, consistently not getting enough sleep can contribute to weight gain over time. This can have adverse impact on your health throughout your college career and possibly into your adult life.

What do you mean I need 8-9 hours of sleep?

Have you ever noticed that when you are tired you are less picky about what you eat and eat more? A study by Culnan, suggests that going to bed late for a shortened amount of time may be an additional contributor to weight gain during freshmen year.\(^1\) In the past several decades there has been a dramatic increase in the rising epidemics of overweight and obesity.\(^2\) At the same time the average sleep duration has decreased from 8-8.9 hours in 1969 to less than 6 hours per night! It has been shown in studies that adults and adolescents having less than 8 hours of sleep per day have significantly lower ability to follow good food and physical activity habits than those who get 8 or more hours of sleep.\(^2\)

When your body is not getting enough sleep your appetite hormones are altered. Ghrelin, known as the "hunger hormone," is increased and leptin, known as the "full hormone," is decreased during lack of sleep.\(^2\) That means your body, in attempt to compensate, increases
your appetite while also limiting your ability to realize when you are full which can lead to overeating at meals. Yikes! As your tiredness increases it is all about comfort and finding foods that are easy and quick. You find yourself reaching for high fat, salty, sugary meals that provide instant gratification versus eating fruits, vegetables and lean proteins. The sneaky change in hormone levels can contribute to excess calorie consumption which can contribute to your overall weight gain. This may not be a big deal if it happens every once and a while but, if it's happening 3 + times a week, watch out!

Exercise, forget that! The zumba and spin class you were planning to take you are now too tired to even consider as you hurriedly rush back to your dorm room to take a power nap. Napping during the day can throw off your sleep schedule which may make it difficult to fall asleep later. Also you are now sedentary so that high fat and high calorie meal you just ate never gets burned off.

Why should I care?

Simply getting a good night's sleep can make maintaining your weight easy! While this may not seem like a big deal now, I speak from personal experience as a four-year college student, that sleep is essential! The health and sleep habits you develop now as a freshman will set the stage of how you cope with added stress, activities and school work for the rest of your college career and potentially the rest of your adult life. It is much harder to lose weight than gain it. Taking the extra step now will mean a happier and healthier you later!

I have no time and I want to do it all! What can I do?

For many of us sleep at the college or even professional level comes as a last priority. There is always a deadline or a social event that will challenge your sleeping needs. We put our bodies in overdrive to complete all of these things when sometimes the best thing for us is sleep. Sleep can challenging especially working around a busy schedule so here are some tips to make sleeping a breeze!

1. Have a bedtime routine
   - Make going to sleep a fun ritual. Read a relaxing book, journal or listen to music to get your mind off the day and allow your mind to relax. The mind is one of the major obstacles for falling asleep!
2. Keep your bed for sleeping
   - Have separate spaces for working and studying. This will help to train your body to know when to rest and when to work.

3. Limit caffeine intake in the evening
   - You’re almost finished with that assignment but need something for that last push. You reach for coffee, only now you will be up for the rest of the night! Instead try a five minute weight-bearing or stretching exercise. This gives your mind and body the break they need while giving you energy to keep going.

4. Limit napping
   - Naps are great but, having them in the middle of the day might make it harder to sleep later because it throws off your natural sleep rhythm.

5. Time Management
   - Having a planner or calendar helps to organize and prioritize tasks so you are not up to the wee hours of the night trying to finish them all.

6. Prepare for tomorrow
   - Planning out what to wear or what to eat in the morning helps to reduce stress of the mind as you fall asleep. This also makes your day kick off to a great start!

7. Exercise in the morning, not before bed
   - An intense workout before bed can stimulate adrenaline which can make it difficult to sleep. Getting regular exercise can help to regulate bodily functions and to avoid restlessness at night, which can help you get a sound sleep. This is important if you spend four plus hours a day sitting!

8. Eat a healthy balanced diet
   - Prepare healthy, easy snack foods in advance so that when you are tired and don’t want to cook, you can easily grab the snack to go.

References