

Sleep's impact on heart health

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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PRINT SCRIPT

Sleep is the “keystone of life.”

That’s how Sarah Zallek, MD, medical director of OSF Sleep in Peoria, Illinois sees it.

“Sleep has to be enough and good quality,” Dr. Zallek says. “For an adult, enough sleep is 7-8 hours. Eight is biological, that’s how we’re programmed. Getting six and fewer hours of sleep has significant risk.”

For kids, Dr. Zallek says the amount of sleep needed changes by age.

“Babies need 16-17 hours a day. Toddlers need 14 hours, but by the time they’re 6 years old and out of kindergarten, kids shouldn’t be sleepy at all during the daytime. They should be exquisitely awake and sleep 12 hours a night,” Dr. Zallek says. “A 10-year-old needs about 10 hours of sleep. Teenagers need between 8-10 hours of sleep a night.”

Consistently failing to sleep enough can lead to a variety of health problems. One in particular is heart disease. Frank Han, MD, a cardiologist with OSF HealthCare who specializes in pediatric and adult congenital heart disease says heart disease isn’t something that happens overnight, but over time.

“The link mainly comes in when you don’t have enough sleep. It then triggers some of the stress hormones of the body,” Dr. Han says. “If you’re changing your sleep schedule a lot, that can mess around with your circadian rhythm.”

Another problem is an increase in inflammation in the body.

“Inflammation causes all sorts of things, including heart disease,” Dr. Zallek says.

The plethora of health problems can be caused by a wide variety of daily choices we make. Dr. Zallek says caffeine can keep you from sleeping. Both Dr. Zallek and Dr. Han say screen time before bed needs to be avoided.

“Don’t play your computer games right before you go to sleep. Don’t have a TV inside your room,” Dr. Han says.

Some people use alcohol to help put them to sleep. Dr. Zallek says while an alcoholic drink can make you sleepy, there are negative consequences to your sleep schedule as well.

“The trick with alcohol is that it wakes you up in the second half of the night. Even if you’re not aware of it, you’ll have less good-quality sleep with alcohol on board,” Dr. Zallek says.

Getting a bad night's sleep isn't just sleeping too little, it can also be sleeping too much. But if you are sleeping less than six hours a night, you're at a greater risk for heart disease, Dr. Zallek says.

"I like to think of six as the magic number," Dr. Zallek says. "And fewer than five hours of sleep almost doubles the risk of coronary artery disease."

For some people who work the night shift, sleeping eight hours straight is extremely difficult. Dr. Zallek says if you do need to work on a "split sleep" schedule, that's still better than only sleeping a few hours a night.

"If you're awake at night, there are all sorts of things that expect you to be sleeping and feel funny," Dr. Zallek says. "So when you're working a night-shift and your stomach feels funny, you're hungry when you shouldn't be, not hungry when you should be or even hungry for the wrong foods, that's very biological."

OSF HealthCare providers work hand-in-hand to help people develop good sleeping habits, while focusing on good-quality overall health. If you need to see a health care provider for sleep challenges, visit the OSF Sleep website.

You can also find locations and resources for heart care OSF provides.