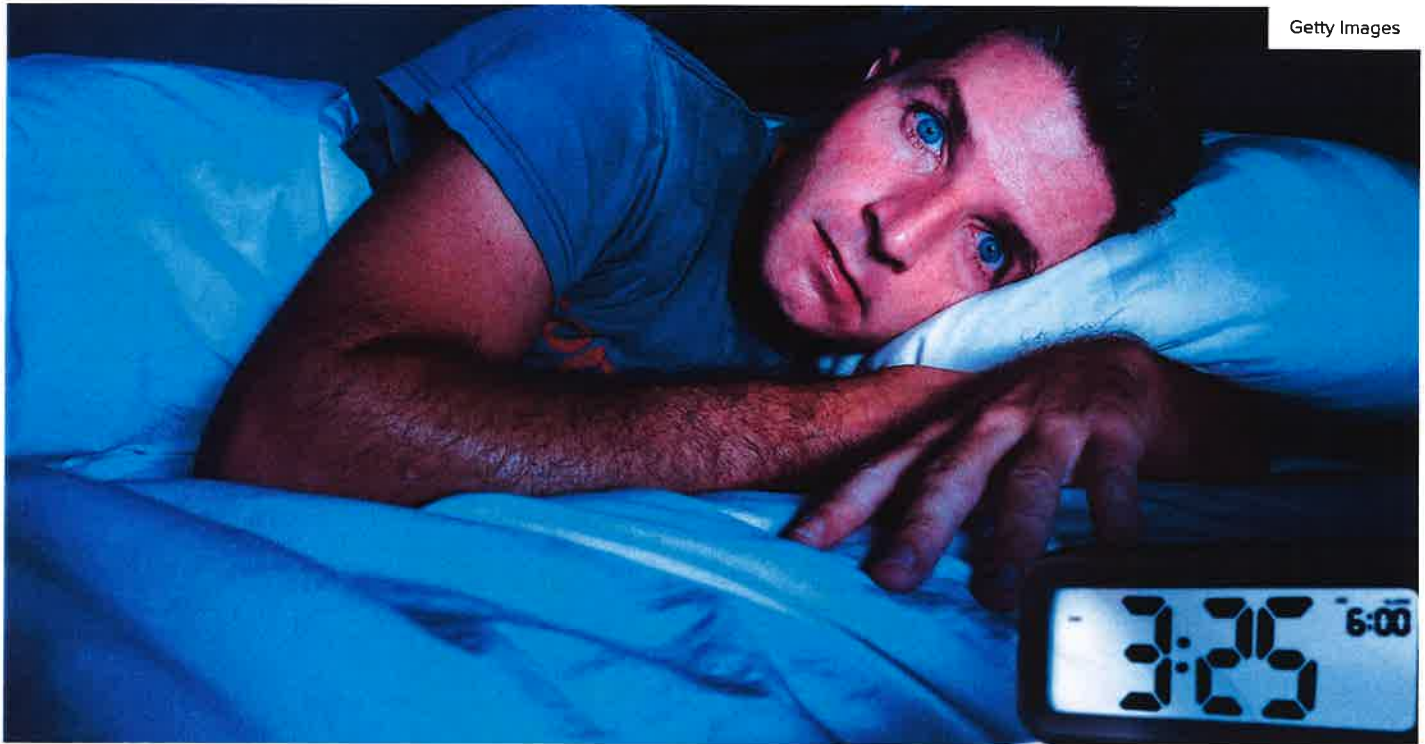


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"Sleep is the most underestimated and underutilized health aid in our modern society," Susan Harris said. "The lack of sleep is now identified as a public health problem by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization."

Sleeplessness affects farm work, tips to improve sleep

Good sleep is an important aspect of someone's overall health. Lack of sleep results in an increased risk of farm accidents.

Alaina Dismukes | Jun 15, 2020

Sleep rules our lives. Sleep controls our physical, emotional, social, nutritional, and cognitive wellbeing. Excess daytime sleepiness increases the risk of farm accidents.

In an AgriSafe webinar, "Sleepless in America," Susan Harris, who works for Rural Health, Wellness, and Safety at the University of Nebraska Extension, provided sleep research and tips for farmers and ag industry workers.

Why sleep is important

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"What if," Harris said, "you saw an ad for sleep in a magazine that said, 'Scientists discovered a revolutionary new treatment that makes you live longer. It enhances your memory and makes you more creative. It makes you look more attractive. It keeps you slim and lowers food cravings. It protects you from cancer and dementia. It wards off colds and the flu. It lowers your risk of heart attack and stroke, not to mention diabetes. You'll even feel happier, less depressed, and less anxious. It's free. Is anybody interested?'"

"Sleep is the most underestimated and underutilized health aid in our modern society," she said. "The lack of sleep is now identified as a public health problem by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization. It's essentially another pandemic we are experiencing, especially our children."

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The definition of insomnia is the difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or experiencing non-restorative sleep. It is associated with daytime impairment or distress and occurs at least three times per week and has been a problem for a month or longer.

"Why is it a big deal?" Harris asked. "People with insomnia can experience problems such as excessive daytime sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, and illness. The risk for accidents increases, which becomes a huge problem on farm and ranch workers dealing with potentially dangerous equipment."

Sleep repairs organs and muscles as well as the immune system. It helps balance hormones and sustains mental health.

"Sleep is essential, especially for our children who are learning and developing every day," she said. "There is a process called consolidation that takes what you learned during the day and cements it into your brain while sleeping."

Emotions are especially affected because we become more irrational when we have less sleep. Coordination and judgment suffer under sleeplessness.

Wide awake

If someone is awake for a long time, it can affect their capacity to function to the point of seeming drunk.

"Say you're awake for about 15 hours. That is the beginning of what's called executive dysfunction," Harris said. "After 18 hours of being awake, it's like having a blood alcohol content of 0.05, which is the legal intoxication level in Utah. Twenty-one hours is like being drunk in Nebraska. Being awake for 24 hours is equivalent to being completely intoxicated. If you ever get into a car to drive after being awake that long, please reconsider."

Not only is your reaction time slowed from lack of sleep, but you can miss pieces of time like microsleep, which makes you a danger to others and yourself.

Tips to improve sleep

Here are a few tips Harris suggested to improve sleep.

- Get up at the same time every day and try to keep your sleep schedule as regular as possible.
- Create mental triggers before bedtime such as reading a book, taking a shower, putting on pajamas which are nonrestrictive, and create a to-do list for the next day, so your head is clear before bed.
- Set your nighttime room temperature at 60 to 68 degrees. When skin cools down, it signals the brain it is time to sleep.

- However, cold feet can interfere with your ability to fall asleep. Place a hot water bottle or heating pad under the covers if socks don't warm them enough.
- Focus on sleep position — spine aligned, arms and legs not bent much, no leg-stacking. Sleep on your back if possible, unless you have sleep apnea.
- Change pillow or mattress plushness to have better support. You don't want pillows to be too plush or flat.
- Talk to your physician about a blood test to determine your iron level or discuss any current medications that may affect sleep. Sometimes taking medicine at a different time of day helps.
- Get direct sunlight after you wake, and dim lights indoors in the evening.
- Exercise and add activity to your day if you aren't currently active.
- Eat healthily and drink water throughout the day. Also, watch your caffeine intake.

Try sleep restriction therapy

Getting up at the same time every day is the number one tip for consistent sleep because your circadian rhythm tells your body when it's time to sleep or be awake.

"Resetting your circadian rhythm happens as soon as you see light in the morning, so if you can make yourself get up at the same time every day naturally, it will keep you on track," Harris said. "There is a trick to get your sleep schedule back on track if you are way off. I know people who have done this with success, but it does take determination and discipline."

The trick is called sleep restriction therapy. The first step is to determine the actual amount of time you are sleeping while in bed. You may be in bed for eight or nine hours, but when did you fall asleep? Did you wake up in the middle of the night? Calculate the average time you were asleep, and for a week, you only allow yourself to be in bed to

sleep for that amount of time. If you need to wake up at 7 a.m. every day, and you are only getting five hours of sleep, you would go to bed at 2 a.m. every night for a week.

"Aim to do this during an unimportant week," she said. "By restricting your sleep time, you are more likely to fall asleep and stay asleep within a set window. After a week, you can start adding 15-minute increments of sleep each week until you wake up before the alarm."

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