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BY TERRI D'ARRIGO

The Secret Life of Zs

A good night's sleep can help you lose weight

Is there anything as refreshing as a good night's sleep? It energizes the body and clears the mind. Yet sleep is often the first thing people sacrifice when life gets busy. Between family obligations, work, errands, and chores, sometimes it seems there aren't enough hours in the day, and it may seem like it's no big deal to get by on 5 or 6 hours of sleep a night.

But it turns out that making a habit of this is not only harmful to your overall health and emotional well-being: It can waylay your weight-loss efforts, too. Researchers in the Nurses Health Study found that women who slept 5 hours or less per

night were 32 percent more likely to gain a significant amount of weight (33 pounds or more) over the course of the 16-year study than those who slept at least 7 hours per night. Those who slept 6 hours per night were 12 percent more likely to experience significant weight gain.

There may be several reasons for the association between sleep deprivation and weight gain. For one thing, not getting enough sleep affects levels of two key hormones, leptin and ghrelin, says Eve Van Cauter, PhD, professor of medicine at the University of Chicago. Leptin is released by fat cells and helps determine satiety, the feeling of fullness after you've eaten. When your body doesn't have enough calories, leptin levels dip. This tells the brain that it's time to eat. Ghrelin is produced in the stomach and signals hunger.

Sleep deprivation lowers leptin levels and raises ghrelin levels, even if you've eaten enough, says Van Cauter. "Even though there's no calorie deficit, your hormones are screaming famine in the middle of plenty," she says. "The body reacts this way because it sees sleep deprivation as a major stressor

[and tries to adapt]. Humans are the only mammals that deprive themselves of sleep. We're simply not wired for it."

What's more, being tired has a tendency to promote cravings for carbohydrates—and that's not going to help either your waistline or your blood glucose.

"We're not sure why, but people tend to crave sweets, salty snacks like potato chips, or other simple carbohydrates like pasta when they don't get enough sleep," Van Cauter says. "It could be that the brain interprets sleep loss as the need for more energy and is asking for more fuel."

It can also come down to effort: If you're exhausted after a sleepless night, it's easier to reach for a bag of pretzels and call it dinner than to prepare a proper meal that includes vegetables and lean proteins.

So if you're trying to lose weight, don't skimp on the Zs. Most experts agree that healthy adults should get between 7 and 8 hours of sleep each night. This should be enough to help keep your hormones in balance, your energy level high—and your resolve strong.

Terri D'Arrigo is an associate editor of Diabetes Forecast.

