



Media Advisory

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Daytime Sleepiness Possible Sign of Underlying Disorder

HCHD Sleep Center addresses common, yet under-diagnosed disorders and improves patients' quality of life

Staying out late, a big lunch, and rainy days can all lead to occasional yawning at work or school. But experiencing excessive daytime sleepiness on a regular basis can be a sign of a more serious condition and it can affect our quality of life, according to Dr. Shyam Subramanian, director of the Harris County Hospital District's Sleep Center at Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, which offers a full spectrum of diagnostic and therapeutic testing of sleep-related problems.

Excessive daytime sleepiness is characterized by feelings of drowsiness and the urge to fall asleep during the day, when you should be awake and fully alert. One direct cause is sleep deprivation—not getting enough sleep at night. But people who do get sufficient rest and are still waking up tired could unknowingly have a sleep disorder.

“Daytime sleepiness is one of the most common conditions we see among patients and it's one of the most often neglected,” says Subramanian. “People tend to think it's normal to feel tired and they don't take it very seriously, but it carries significant health risks.”

A common sleep disorder, obstructive sleep apnea, is now increasingly linked to diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular problems, affecting both youth and adults. Sleep disorders can also worsen pre-existing medical conditions if left untreated, which is why sleep studies offered at the Hospital District's Sleep Center are crucial. They act as preventative care, improving patients' overall health and potentially reducing future health care needs.

In addition to health problems, sleep deprivation influences a person's mood, causing them to become tense and irritable. Among adolescents, it can lead to falling asleep during class, missing assignments and making poor grades. Safety is another concern. Driving drowsy is similar to driving while intoxicated, and it is among the leading causes of automobile accidents in the nation.

“Sleep is essential to our physical and emotional well-being. You can't function properly if your body doesn't get the rest it needs,” Subramanian says. “It's important to find what's causing the problem and address it.”

Two of the most common sleep disorders are sleep apnea and insomnia.

Obstructive sleep apnea is a common medical condition that affects more than a third of heavy snorers. It results when narrowing of the air passage-ways leads to repeated episodes of asphyxia or breathing. Individuals who snore loudly and periodically stop breathing during sleep are likely to have this disease. This can be easily treated with various devices and procedures.

Insomnia, on the other hand, can be caused by medical, psychological or psychiatric problems. It is a common disorder that affects 10 to 15 percent of the general population, but often goes undiagnosed. Four symptoms generally associated with insomnia are: difficulty falling asleep; waking up too early and not being able to go back to sleep; frequent awakenings; and waking up feeling tired.

There are a number of medical conditions that cause insomnia. More often than not, however, it's people's disruptive behaviors that perpetuate the problem, according to Subramanian. A change in daily habits is usually helpful.

"Most people I know are guilty of practicing poor sleep hygiene," he says. "They engage in disruptive behaviors that the mind begins associating with sleep, like paying the bills in bed or playing video games shortly before bedtime."

Subramanian suggests the following best practices of good sleep hygiene:

- Engage in a bedtime routine with regular sleep and wake times
- Avoid using the bed for activities other than sleep, like reading, paying bills, watching television, or doing office/home work
- Avoid daytime naps
- Don't exercise or consume caffeine, nicotine or alcohol close to bedtime
- Avoid heavy meals at night
- Avoid time cues if waking up frequently during the night
- Implement "Me Time" to reflect and clear the mind prior to going to bed

Consult your physician if you are experiencing difficulties with sleep.

Dr. Subramanian is director of Sleep Services at Baylor College of Medicine.

The Harris County Hospital District is the public healthcare system for the nation's third most-populous county. It provides care for more than 1.1 million patient visits each year to uninsured, underinsured and injured residents of Harris County, Texas. The Hospital District operates Ben Taub General Hospital, Lyndon B. Johnson General Hospital, Quentin Mease Community Hospital, 12 community health centers, a dental center, seven school-based clinics, 13 homeless shelter clinics and four mobile health units.

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