Good Night (and Good Luck!)

African Americans aren't getting enough sleep. Here's how to score some shut-eye.

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Do you find yourself hitting the snooze button every morning or dragging yourself out of bed? A recent study may explain why. Researchers at the University of Chicago recorded the sleeping habits of 669 participants and found that while white women slept, on average, 6.7 hours a night and white men 6.1 hours, black women sawed logs for only 5.9 hours and black men for 5.1, the least of all involved in the study. Not only did black participants have a harder time falling asleep, they didn't sleep as deeply.

Researchers suspect that money may be a factor. More than 60% of the white enrollees earned at least $75,000, compared with only 24% of their black counterparts, perhaps providing wealthier sleepers with a more relaxing environment and fewer worries. Black men were also more likely to drink alcohol, which leads to lighter, more disrupted slumber.

A good night's rest not only assures you'll be alert at morning meetings; it restores the body and lowers the risk of diabetes, obesity and hypertension. Insomniacs are also at greater risk of developing mental health problems, including depression and substance abuse.

Many people turn to prescription or over-the-counter sleep medications when they have trouble catching Z's. According to the American Insomnia Association, sleep meds are generally not dangerous if they are taken as directed. Still, they can have side effects, such as drowsiness or dry mouth, and they carry the risk of dependency.

Simple lifestyle changes can help you sleep better. The National Sleep Foundation suggests scheduling a regular bedtime and wake time; sleeping on a comfortable mattress; eliminating bedroom distractions, such as TV; finishing meals at least two to three hours before bedtime; and refraining from alcohol, caffeine and nicotine before bed. If you still don't feel rested, seek professional help; insomnia can signal an underlying illness. Not all docs are well schooled on sleep, though; if your family physician can't help you, seek a specialist. Visit www.sleepcenters.org to find a sleep center near you.

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