

David S. Edwards, M.D.

How important is sleep for studying and retaining information?

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Well, it's very important particularly for the average college student who is spending more time than usual studying, learning new information. And oftentimes, you know, exercising vigorously. Sleep helps us to recharge physically and mentally. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine advises that the average adult get at least seven hours of sleep every night, but research data showed that the average college student only gets closer to about six hours of sleep per night. Sleep deprivation is associated with mood changes, it's associated with decreased attention, decreased ability to concentrate, and sadly, it can even affect the student's GPA.

Do caffeine and study drugs help students study and learn?

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It's tricky, so caffeine does help. It helps maintain focus and attention. It is relatively safe when used in standard doses. For example, one to two cups of coffee or tea, we do begin to worry when people are getting excessive doses of caffeine through energy drinks, or through pre workout supplements. And the consequences of excessive caffeine include withdrawal when they're not getting it regularly. Chest pain, palpitations racing of the heart, and anxiety. Anxiety can be worse, especially in those who already had some anxiety to begin with, before they took the caffeine. Now study drugs are really a different category, in my opinion. In general, when I think of study drugs, I think about pharmaceutical medication that is used for non medicinal purposes, whether that's to get high, whether that's to maintain focus and study, or prepare for finals. And that's really a more dangerous category. Whenever people are using medications for non medicinal purposes, we worry about side effects. We worry about addiction, and we worry about even fatalities, particularly when combined with alcohol or other drugs.

What are the disadvantages of consuming caffeine and study drugs?

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Well, the disadvantages to caffeine are relatively mild, as long as it's being used in appropriate doses. Around finals we do see students who present with racing have their heart palpitations, chest pain, worsening anxiety, usually, as in this case, a setting of taking too much caffeine. So typically pulling all nighters plus consuming energy drinks, plus taking pre workout supplements. When we think about study drugs, those risks are much more serious. Those risks include psychosis. They include behavioral problems, mood changes, and even direct effects on the heart and the blood pressure. Unfortunately, use of these study drugs is common. The college prescription drug study indicates that over the last year, about one in seven college or postgraduate students used a study drug for a non medicinal purpose. So unfortunately, this is a common problem. But again, it can be very dangerous.

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Can caffeine and study drugs affect sleep?

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Yes, both of these are considered stimulants. Study drugs are often in the amphetamine or methamphetamine family. So it's essentially like taking speed. And there's really no good antidote for that to help try to sleep other than to let the drug wear itself out of the system. When we think about caffeine, caffeine has a long half life, that means it lingers in the body for hours. So for example, if I drink coffee at 4pm, about half of that caffeine is still in my system, around bedtime, 11 or 12 in the evening, so, you know, we do worry about those medications and caffeine in terms of affecting people's ability to sleep. And sadly, there's really no great option to reverse those medicines or drugs, other than to let them wear themselves out of the system.

Can caffeine be beneficial for focus or studying?

4:38

Taking some caffeine early in the day helps many people with attention and concentration. Some people need an early afternoon dose of caffeine to kind of make it through and get past that siesta. It's period of time late in the afternoon. But again, we wouldn't want people drinking caffeine or taking caffeine supplements in the evening, because it'll affect their ability to sleep that night.

Are there healthier ways to increase energy and focus?

5:08

It's a trifecta, it's healthy eating, it's exercising consistently. And it's getting enough sleep. And so really trying to make those a priority or key, whether someone's in college or not. And so just the simple things like staying well hydrated, trying to get more fruits and vegetables in the diet can make a big difference in terms of energy level. Paying attention to mental health can be really important as well. We were never designed to be lone wolves, so to speak, we are designed for community and fellowship. And so many people find that energizing when they can be around their peers when they can be in a supportive social environment that can help maintain focus, and mood and overall well being and then exercising consistently. I should say we don't want people to exercise vigorously in the evening that can actually make sleep a little bit more difficult. But exercise earlier in the day can actually promote a more restful and restorative sleep. So really focusing on those three areas would be key for optimum health and wellness and also optimum optimal performance in the classroom.

What resources are available for students who are struggling with sleep or dependency?

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Yes, we have resources here at our Student Wellness Center on the Texas Tech undergraduate campus. We also have resources available particularly when there are mental health concerns with our team of clinicians here, and counseling services through our Student Counseling

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Center on the second floor of this building. We offer a variety of treatments for insomnia. We help people walk through the journey of discontinuing medications or caffeine in this case, and we even offer cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia which is an evidence based treatment for chronic insomnia that has not responded to the traditional measures.