

Key to Healthy Weight? Sleep!

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If you think your child gets enough sleep, think again. According to the National Sleep Foundation, most children sleep less than their parents realize. And nearly 70 percent of children have some sleep problem such as waking during the night, sleeping too little or having difficulty falling asleep at least a few nights each week.

Sacrificing Sleep

Emerging research suggests that sleep is just as important as nutrition and exercise are to your child's health – and we're talking about more than colds and the flu. Scientists aren't sure why, but too little sleep is linked with both packing on extra pounds and developing type 2 diabetes, explains Amy Jamieson-Petonic, RD, spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and director of coaching at Cleveland Clinic. Researchers have observed this weight effect in kids of all ages – even infants, toddlers and preschoolers. One theory for weight gain is that inadequate sleep disrupts hormone levels that regulate appetite and food intake. Thus, too little sleep means bigger portions of foods and more snacking, Jamieson-Petonic explains.

When kids are overextended in activities, weighted down with homework, constantly texting or plugged into the Internet and other technology, something has to give. Unfortunately, it's frequently an hour or two of shut-eye that gets knocked from the priority list. Sleepy kids lack the energy and focus for playing outside and doing schoolwork. They're more likely to sit in front of the TV where they burn few calories and challenge neither their minds nor their bodies, says registered dietitian Marilyn Tanner-Blasiar, spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Set a Routine

The good news is that you can help them sleep better and longer. If they're involved in too many activities, set priorities for young children and help your older children set their own. Limit afterschool clubs and sports to a manageable number. Finally, create a bedtime routine such as dinner, bath, massage and a story, urges Jamieson-Petonic. Routines help kids – and adults – ease into a night's slumber. Bedtime routines should always include at least a few minutes of downtime such as reading a book or telling a story to small children. Older kids may enjoy reading to themselves or to you. Teens might like a few minutes chatting with parents or journaling about their day. As hard as it might be, keep the phone and texting out of bed; and avoid exercise, television and the Internet shortly before bedtime. Find the schedule that works for you and your children, and do your best to stick to it every night, urges Tanner-Blasiar.