

Are Your Sleeping Habits Making You Fat?

There are many causes of weight gain: a sedentary lifestyle, overeating, and excessive consumption of sugary, calorie-dense processed foods. But did you know that your sleeping habits could be causing you to gain weight?

Several studies have found a direct link between weight gain and a lack of sleep. The Journal Sleep found that middle-aged adults who averaged less than seven hours of sleep a night usually had a higher body mass index (BMI) and were more likely to be obese than those who slept more than seven hours a night.

A University of Chicago in Illinois study found that sleep restriction caused ghrelin levels to rise and leptin levels to fall. Ghrelin is a hormone that stimulates appetite; when your ghrelin levels are high, your body requires more food to feel full. Leptin reduces your appetite and sends signals to your brain when you've had enough to eat.

A comprehensive study from Stanford University showed a direct correlation between poor sleeping habits and higher BMI. They also find higher ghrelin and lower leptin levels among those who averaged less than eight hours of sleep per night.

A 2006 study from the American Thoracic Society of almost 70,000 women found that those who averaged 5 hours of sleep per night had a 32% higher chance of experiencing a weight gain of up to 33 pounds over a 16 year period than women who averaged 7 hours per night. Those with lower levels of sleep also had higher levels of insulin resistance, which contributes to an increased risk of diabetes.

Interestingly, those who slept less also ate less but still experienced weight gain. Researchers hypothesize that inadequate sleep affects the basal metabolic rate, reducing the number of calories burned while resting. This means good sleeping habits are almost as important as diet and exercise for weight control.

Tips to Improve Your Sleeping Habits.

Everyone needs slightly different amounts of sleep, but most research suggests that seven to eight hours per night is optimal. Here are some tips to help you improve your sleeping habits.

- **Exercise during the day.** Besides benefits for weight loss, exercise will help you sleep better and fall asleep faster.
- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule.** Try your best to wake up at the same time every day. Even oversleeping one morning can disrupt your sleep schedule.
- **Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine before bed.** These substances not only keep you awake but reduce the quality of your sleep.

- **Have a low-calorie, natural snack before bed.** Avoid anything sugary or high in carbohydrates.
- **Keep your room cool.** According to the National Sleep Foundation, a bedroom between 54 and 75F is ideal for sleeping.
- **Use your bed only for sleeping and sex.** Other activities like reading, television watching, and eating may convince your mind your bed is a place to be awake.
- **Don't lay awake too long.** If you spend more than 20 minutes trying to fall asleep, get out of bed and do something to take your mind off sleeping. Worrying about falling asleep can increase your stress levels, making it even harder to fall asleep.

If you're trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight, getting enough sleep is vitally important. We often think of losing weight as an ongoing struggle, but for some people, the first step may be as simple as getting a good night's sleep.