



Ontario Provincial Council  
Of The Catholic Women's League of Canada  
Education and Health Standing Committee

Directive #5

Page: 1

November 13, 2017

To: Diocesan Education and Health Committee Chairpersons  
From: Wilma Vanderzwaag, Ontario Provincial Council, Education and Health Standing Committee Chairperson, Sub Committee Chairs: Mary Lou Watson and Heather Sisk  
cc: Diocesan Presidents, Provincial Officers, National Health and Education Standing Committee Chairperson

---

With the winter months almost here and the darkest day of the year coming, I thought this was the perfect time to discuss the importance of sleep. All of us have heard people we work with or socialize with bragging that they can get by on little sleep—do not believe this. We are a society that is sleep deprived and there are powerful links between sleep loss and, among other things, Alzheimer's disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity and poor mental health. The definition of sleep deprivation is anything less than seven hours. In 1942, less than 8% of the population was trying to survive on 6 hours or less sleep a night; in 2017, almost one in two people is. There are many reasons—longer work hours, longer commutes, loneliness, depression, the availability of caffeine and alcohol to name just a few.

The world of sleep science is small but growing. There is new technology which enable researchers to have access to the sleeping brain. Dr. Matthew Walker, Director of the Centre for Human Sleep Science at the University of California, while studying the brainwave patterns of people with different types of dementia found that sleep could be a new early diagnostic test for different subtypes of dementia. By studying sleep, Dr. Walker also found that by one night of only four or five hours' sleep, your natural killer cells—the ones that attack the cancer cells that appear in your body everyday—drop by 70%, or that a lack of sleep is linked to cancer of the bowel, prostate and breast. The World Health Organization has classed any form of night-time shift work as a probable carcinogen. More than 20 large scale epidemiological studies all report the same clear relationship: the shorter your sleep, the shorter your life. Adults aged 45 years or older who sleep less than 6 hours a night are 200% more likely to have a heart attack or stroke in their lifetime, as compared to those sleeping 7 or 8 hours a night. This is in part to do with blood pressure; even just one night of modest sleep reduction will speed the rate of a person's heart and significantly increase their blood pressure. Lack of sleep also effects our blood sugar. The cells of sleep deprived persons become less responsive to insulin. People that are not getting enough sleep are susceptible to weight gain. Sleep has a powerful effect on the immune system. Studies show that short sleep can affect our cancer-fighting immune cells. Well rested people respond better to the flu vaccine.

Sleep also has an effect on mental health. Deep sleep—the part when we begin to dream—is a therapeutic state during which we cast off the emotional charge of our experiences, making them easier to deal with.

The Harvard Women's Health Watch suggests six reasons to get enough sleep:

- 1) Learning and memory: sleep helps the brain commit new information to memory through a process called memory consolidation. In studies people who'd slept after learning a task did better on tests later.

- 2) Metabolism and weight: chronic sleep deprivation may cause weight gain by affecting the way our bodies process and store carbohydrates, and by altering levels of hormones that affect our appetite.
- 3) Safety: sleep debt contributes to a greater tendency to fall asleep during the daytime. These lapses may cause falls and mistakes such as medical errors, air traffic mishaps and road accidents.
- 4) Mood: sleep loss may result in irritability, impatience, inability to concentrate and moodiness. Too little sleep can also leave you too tired to do things you like to do.
- 5) Cardiovascular health: serious sleep disorders have been linked to hypertension, increased stress hormone levels and irregular heartbeat.
- 6) Disease: sleep deprivation alters immune function, including the activity of the body's killer cells. Keeping up with sleep may also help fight cancer.

Here are some ways to help you get a better night's sleep.

- 1) Cut caffeine. It's important to reduce if not eliminate caffeine from your diet. If you can't give it up entirely, at least try to stay away from caffeine within four to six hours of bedtime; half of the caffeine you take in at 7pm is still in your body at 11.
- 2) Limit alcohol. Alcohol alters your sleep patterns and the quality of your sleep.
- 3) Butt out. Nicotine is a stimulant, just like caffeine and can disrupt your sleep.
- 4) Eat lightly. A heavy meal just before bed isn't good for your sleep or your health.
- 5) Set a schedule. Your body needs to become habituated to going to bed and getting up at set times.
- 6) Establish a rhythm. Plan a relaxing routine for the 30-60 minutes before bed.
- 7) Say no to naps. Midday naps can perpetuate the cycle of sleep problems. If you absolutely must lie down, make it a catnap only-10-20 minutes.
- 8) Get a workout. Add exercise to your daily regimen it will help get a better quality of sleep.
- 9) Put away that tablet. If you want to read in bed, don't use a smartphone, tablet or other light-emitting e-reader. Blue light from screens seems to be the most potent at slowing down the production of melatonin.
- 10) Clear the clutter. People relax more easily when their bedrooms aren't cluttered and full of distractions. One survey found that people who made their bed in the morning were 19% more likely to get a good night's sleep.
- 11) Get up. If you are tossing and turning and getting frustrated that you are unable to get to sleep, get up. Get up and do something relaxing, like reading a book until you feel drowsy.
- 12) Try therapy. If insomnia is a real issue try cognitive behavior therapy to help train yourself for a better night's sleep.
- 13) Keep it cool. A cool bedroom is best for sleep-66 degrees is recommended.
- 14) Keep it quiet. If you have a busy household or live on a street with a lot of traffic, consider a "white noise" machine.

If you are having trouble getting a good night's sleep, try some of these suggestions. Getting more sleep is one of the best ways to improve your health. Sweet dreams!

