

Family matters when it comes to a good night's sleep

May 31 2012, By Stephanie Stephens



Sound, restful sleep may be just a dream for millions of Americans with strained family relationships.

That's the finding of a new study published in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

“[Sleep](#) is a fundamental human experience—everyone has to sleep, but not everyone gets restful sleep,” said study co-author Jennifer Ailshire, Ph.D., a sociologist and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Southern California.

More than 50 million Americans have trouble falling or staying asleep, the authors noted. The majority of previous sleep research has focused

on individual psychological and biomedical risk factors such as depression and illness, but there is a growing area of research into the effect of [social relationships](#) on sleep quality.

“Sleep is highly sensitive to what’s going on in our daily lives, including our interactions with others,” said Ailshire. Other studies of social relationships and sleep have looked primarily at the effects of spousal relationships and caregiving for children. “But our sleep can also be influenced by relationships with other family members who do not live with us.”

In this study, the researchers focused on the family and on the social context in which sleep occurs. “In particular, we considered who we are interacting with during the day, before sleep and when we first wake up,” Ailshire said. “Social relationships tend to benefit health and wellbeing, but having demanding [family relationships](#) may not be so good for us or our sleep.”

She and co-author Sarah A. Burgard, Ph.D., M.D. of the University of Michigan used self-reported data from the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States to examine the associations between troubled sleep and the frequency of contact with family outside of the home, social support provided by those family members and strained or negative interactions with family. They found weekly or daily sleep problems are more prevalent in people with frequent contact with family, especially for people with difficult relationships.

“This study is consistent with previous research that has suggested that people stay awake at night thinking and worrying about their family members,” said Ailshire.

“It's a well-tested social fact that relationships with spouses and young children shape our sleep, primarily because we live with these

individuals and our time and space is constrained by their needs,” said Corinne Reczek, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology at the University of Cincinnati and an expert on family relationships.

“Yet, we are all embedded in much broader family relationships that may impact our health behavior, including sleep,” Reczek said. “This is one of the first studies to show how relationships with other [family members](#) that we do not live with—such as siblings, aging parents, and adult children—shape sleep. Because sleep is linked to a variety of aspects of health, this has major implications for how relationships with extended family shape health overall.”

“Maybe we can’t change those relationships, but if we know they’re affecting our sleep, we can try to be proactive about developing strategies to minimize the effect of [family stress](#),” said Ailshire. “Also, in addition to prescribing sleep aids and other therapeutic approaches, I’d hope clinicians dealing with people who report trouble sleeping talk to them about the broader context of their social lives and their daily stressors.”

More information: Jennifer A. Ailshire and Sarah A. Burgard (2012). Family Relationships and Troubled Sleep among U.S. Adults: Examining the Influences of Contact Frequency and Relationship Quality. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 53(2) 248–262. [DOI: 10.1177/0022146512446642](#)

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