

# Study links insomnia to \$31 billion in U.S. workplace errors

October 1 2012, by Randy Dotinga, Healthday Reporter

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Research was based on interviews with more than 10,000 people.

(HealthDay)—Feeling sleepy on the job and having trouble focusing? It could cost you—and the nation as a whole. A new study estimates that insomnia is responsible for 274,000 workplace accidents and errors each year, adding up to \$31 billion in extra costs.

The research isn't conclusive, and it's possible that some factors other than sleeplessness may explain these mishaps. The findings also depend on the possibly hazy recollections of several thousand workers about things that happened to them over the past year.

Still, the study does suggest a link between [lack of sleep](#) and problems in the workplace. The findings could encourage workplaces to pay more attention to [insomnia](#) and screen employees for the condition, said lead

author Victoria Shahly, a [clinical psychologist](#) and instructor at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

"Accidents and errors directly affect the corporate bottom line," Shahly said.

Sleepiness, of course, is a big enemy of focus. When you're tired, your powers of memory, [coordination](#) and attention start to decline. In the new study, Shahly and her colleagues tried to understand what this means at the workplace.

In 2008 and 2009, researchers surveyed more than 10,000 people in the United States who had [health insurance](#) and spoke English. The participants, who were chosen because they represented people in the country overall, answered questions through [phone conversations](#).

The participants received \$20 each for taking part in the study. The researchers focused on nearly 5,000 people who were employed.

The researchers estimated that 20 percent of the participants suffered from insomnia for at least 12 months.

As for mishaps, the researchers found that 5.5 percent of those who appeared to have insomnia said they caused accidents or made errors at work that cost at least \$500, compared with 4 percent of those who didn't seem to have insomnia.

Accidents and errors include mishaps such as making a [mistake](#) on an [assembly line](#) that shuts it down, getting into a car accident while on the job and miscalculations, Shahly said.

The researchers estimated that insomnia is linked to about 7 percent of all costly workplace accidents and errors, and 24 percent of the overall

cost of the mishaps overall. They estimated that the cost of the mishaps related to insomnia is \$31.1 billion.

It is unknown if the study participants who suffered from sleeplessness had a worse memory about workplace accidents than those who didn't. It also is not clear how much it would cost to treat 20 percent of the working population of the United States for insomnia and whether the expense would run to more than the cost of the workplace [errors](#) themselves.

Kevin Morgan, director of Loughborough University's Clinical Sleep Research Unit, in Leicestershire, England, praised the study and said it's an important examination of an "under-researched" topic.

Until now, researchers have tried to understand the effect of sleeplessness on work by focusing on how it contributes to employees staying home from their jobs, he said. "But this research is directed at people screwing up *at* work."

Would it cost more to treat people for insomnia than to suffer from workplace mishaps?

"You can feed them sleeping tablets—this works in the short term—but then it goes bad, creating drug-dependent patients who get little benefit from their drugs," Morgan said. "Ironically, you then have to invest in withdrawal programs to get them off drugs, only to find that the insomnia—which was there all the time—returns."

Insomnia, however, often is treated successfully by cognitive behavioral therapy designed to help change the way people think, Morgan said, and the treatment is inexpensive. Approximately 60 percent to 70 percent of long-term insomniacs can get a benefit from four to five hours of cognitive behavioral therapy.

The new study appears in the October issue of the journal *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

**More information:**

For more about [insomnia](#), try the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

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