

Sleepiness epidemic hits Australia

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A new national sleep study involving the University of Adelaide reveals Australia is in the grip of a sleep deprivation epidemic that is dragging down the nation's productivity, risking safety and damaging mental health.

Research led by the University of Adelaide's Professor Robert Adams for the Sleep Health Foundation has found 33 to 45% of adults [sleep](#) either poorly or not long enough most nights, leaving them to face the new day with fatigue, irritability and other side effects of sleep deprivation.

The work, published today in the international journal *Sleep Health*, also shows alarmingly high rates of internet use just before bed, particularly among women, and carries admissions from one in five people that they've nodded off while driving.

"These worrying results just go to show that sleep is not the national health priority it needs to be," says Dr David Hillman, a Director of the Foundation, the leading national advocate for [sleep health](#). "Just like obesity, smoking, drinking too much and not exercising enough, [sleep problems](#) cause real harm in our community. It's high time we moved this issue off the backburner to the forefront of national thinking."

The University's Professor Adams (Adelaide Medical School) led the online study of more than 1000 Australians. It found sleep problems, such as difficulties sleeping at least a few times a week or more, or sleep-related daytime symptoms, are very common, affecting more than a third of adults. Women are significantly more likely than men to have difficulty falling asleep, waking too early, feeling unrefreshed, sleepy, fatigued, exhausted, irritable and moody, even when they sleep as much as men.

Diagnosed [sleep disorders](#) are common, with men more likely to suffer from the night time breathing condition [obstructive sleep apnoea](#) and women hardest hit by insomnia.

Dr Hillman also highlighted concerning figures around night time computer use. "Overall, 44% of adults are on the internet just before bed

almost every night and 59% of these late night workers, web surfers, movie watchers or online gamers have more than two sleep problems," he says. "This is no coincidence. This habit is having a direct and very negative impact on sleep and without a cohesive national strategy to combat it, this won't change."

The Foundation says it was also alarmed by figures showing 29% of adults drive while drowsy at least once a month, and 20% have nodded off at the wheel at some time. 5% admitted having an accident in the past year because they dozed off. The work day is also affected, with some 21% of men and 13% of women questioned admitting to having fallen asleep at work in the past month.

A comparison with the Foundation's 2010 survey suggests sleep problems and their consequences are 5 to 10% worse than they were six years ago.

Dr Hillman says a cultural shift needs to take place to turn around the country's dire sleep statistics. "There is a false belief shared by a lot of us that sleep is a waste of time and that we can get away with less than we really need," he says. "But the truth is people who cut corners with their sleep function below their best. They are not as mentally sharp, as vigilant, as attentive or as patient as they would otherwise be."

The result is a less productive, less safe and less pleasant work and family environment, Dr Hillman explains. "Accident risk goes up, workplace performance goes down and your mood, your heart and your blood pressure can all be affected."

While individuals can make lifestyle changes to help get a better night's sleep, the problem was now so widespread and insidious, a national health strategy was needed to turn trends around, the foundation says. "We need a fundamental change in the way sleep is viewed by everyone

from teenagers, parents and teachers through to bosses, doctors and our top politicians," Dr Hillman says.

Key Findings:

- Inadequate sleep, of either duration or quality, and its daytime consequences regularly affect 33-45% of adults.
- Average reported [sleep time](#) is 7 hours, although 12% sleep less than 5.5 hours and 8% over 9 hours.
- Three-quarters of those who sleep less than 5.5 hours report frequent daytime impairment or sleep-related symptoms.
- Frequent, loud snoring is reported by 24% of men and 17% of women. Among these, 70% report daytime impairment or other sleep-related symptoms.
- Almost a third of adults (29%) report making errors at work due to sleepiness or sleep problems within 3 months of the survey.
- Almost a third of adults drive when drowsy at least every month, and one in five have nodded off while driving within the last year.
- 44% of adults (47% women, 40% men) are on the internet just before bed almost every night. Of these, 59% have two or more sleep problems.

More information: Robert J. Adams et al. Sleep health of Australian adults in 2016: results of the 2016 Sleep Health Foundation national survey, *Sleep Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.sleh.2016.11.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2016.11.005)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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