

Better sleep: Less fast food and screen time, more physical activity

June 23 2021, by Brian McNeill



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Getting a good night's rest is essential to our physical and mental health. But what behaviors lead to healthy sleep? And do those lifestyle factors change as we get older?

A new study by researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University has investigated the sleep, lifestyle and [health](#) of 3,284 adults. It found that behaviors directly under our control—such as diet, how physically active or sedentary we are, and how much time we spend watching TV, reading, on the internet, and on social media—are associated with sleep health across the lifespan.

"For decades, [sleep medicine](#) has focused exclusively on disordered sleep to the exclusion of [healthy sleep](#). Sleep health is a newer concept that incorporates factors thought to be associated with the positive experience of sleep," said lead author Joseph Dzierzewski, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences. "Understanding factors associated with good sleep, as opposed to corrective actions for poor sleep, could have important implications for the general population."

The study, "Lifestyle Factors and Sleep Health across the Lifespan," was published Sunday in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* as part of a special issue on sleep quality, well-being and [mental health](#) among adults.

It found that older adults reported the highest amount of sleep health, followed by middle-aged and younger adults. Across [age groups](#), fast-food consumption, sedentary behavior, daytime activity irregularity, and exposure to media—including daily TV minutes, social media usage and internet usage—correlated negatively with sleep health.

The finding that sleep health was highest in older adults as compared to young and middle-aged adults also was notable, Dzierzewski said. "This finding is in contrast to decades of research showing that [older adults](#) have higher rates of virtually all sleep disorders."

Another interesting finding, he said, is that some lifestyle factors, such

as being physically active or sedentary, varied in how closely they were associated with sleep health among older, middle-aged and younger adults.

"[These findings suggest] that as we age and go through various life stages and transitions, those factors associated with healthy sleep change," Dzierzewski said. "This points to the need to take a lifespan developmental approach to the investigation of sleep health."

The study was cross-sectional, meaning it analyzed data from a population in a specific point in time, and so direct clinical recommendations should be considered preliminary. However, Dzierzewski said, it provides evidence in support of practical steps people could take to improve their [sleep health](#).

"The study results imply that eating less fast food, watching less TV, spending less time on the internet (broadly) and social media (specifically), along with living a regular lifestyle all may help promote high-quality, healthy sleep," he said.

In addition to Dzierzewski, the study's authors include VCU psychology graduate students Sahar M. Sabet, Sarah M. Ghose, Elliottnell Perez, Pablo Soto, Scott G. Ravyts; and Natalie D. Dautovich, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and National Sleep Foundation environmental scholar.

The study builds on a related paper, published in May in the journal *Sleep Health*, that explored the association between social [media](#) use and sleep and whether the association differed by age.

That study, "Trading Likes for Sleepless Nights: A Lifespan Investigation of Social Media and Sleep," led by VCU psychology doctoral student Elliottnell Perez, found that greater [social media](#) use

was associated with poorer sleep quality and shorter sleep duration, and that association increased with age.

More information: Elliottneil Perez et al, Trading likes for sleepless nights: A lifespan investigation of social media and sleep, *Sleep Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.sleh.2021.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleh.2021.03.004)

Joseph M. Dzierzewski et al, Lifestyle Factors and Sleep Health across the Lifespan, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph18126626](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18126626)

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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