- Sleep

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HEALTH

Prioritise regular sleep patterns over total hours, says study

A bad bedtime routine is more dangerous than a lack of sleep

The measurement most often used to gauge a good night's sleep is the number of hours of shuteye we get. And although getting plenty of sleep is definitely important, what we should be paying more attention to is our bedtime routine.

That's according to a new study published in the journal *Sleep*. It suggests that a person's sleep regularity (the consistency of their sleep-wake timing) is a stronger predictor of mortality risk than sleep duration. Even people who manage to sleep consistently for seven to eight hours each night, but who keep irregular schedules, are at a higher risk of strokes, heart attacks and cancer than those who slept fewer hours, but maintained a more consistent schedule.

Now, this doesn't mean you can get away with only a few hours of sleep every night, staying up as long as you want before regularly crawling into bed at 3am. The findings of the study show that those who got under six hours of sleep, or over nine, each night were at an increased risk too.

Researchers analysed sleep data from almost 61,000 people in the UK Biobank, a biomedical database tracking the health of half a million people in the UK. In total, they examined more than 10 million hours of recorded sleep. Using advanced algorithms to study sleep patterns and tracking people's death rates over an average of 6.3 years, they identified the factors linked to a higher risk of early death.

Overall, the people who had the most consistent sleep-wake times had up to a 48-per-cent lower risk of all-cause mortality compared to those with the least consistent routines.

The researchers hope these findings will help update public health guidelines and sleep recommendations. Given the risks, they believe advice should focus not just on getting enough sleep, but on maintaining a regular schedule for better overall health.

