

We see quite a few worried parents who bring their teenage son or daughter into the office with a variety of vague complaints including, general fatigue, concentration problems, irritability, insomnia, headaches, stomach aches, and dizziness. On further questioning, we find these teens are often getting only 6 to 7 hours of sleep, burning the candle at both ends with school, athletic activities, work obligations, and social networking. They are frequently skipping breakfast due to time constraints, eating fast food with sodas throughout the day, and staying up late at night watching TV or catching up with their friends in on-line chat rooms at the expense of turning in early for the night.

Fortunately for most of these teens they likely do not have medical conditions causing their symptoms. Their life style choices are starting to have a negative input on their health. Three of the most obvious areas in a teen's life that can affect their overall well being are healthy sleep habits, proper nutrition and hydration, and regular exercise.

Sleep is one of the most common areas where teens, and for that matter adults, try to cut corners in their busy lives. Without the proper quantity and quality of sleep on a regular basis, the body and brain can subtly begin to malfunction. Symptoms of inadequate sleep include concentration difficulties, fatigue with frequent drifting off throughout the day, headaches, irritability, and poor decision making. The average teen needs eight and a half to ten hours a night in getting enough sleep to feel at their best. One method of telling if your teen is getting enough sleep is to monitor how late they sleep in on the weekends. If they are getting up more than an hour or two later this is a sign that they are trying to catch up on the sleep they missed the previous school week. Another sign of inadequate sleep is the need for afternoon naps or falling asleep during homework, in the car, and in class. The quality of sleep is important as well. If your teen stays up late watching TV just before bed, their ability to fall asleep will be altered and most likely their sleep will be less restful. Like a cup of coffee, television is very stimulating to the brain making it difficult to wind down at bedtime. It's a great idea if your teen has a 10pm bedtime to get them away from the TV and computer by 9:15-9:30 to allow for a wind down period- take a shower or read a book. They will find that they fall asleep more quickly and restfully through the night.

Another typical area where teens cut corners is in their eating habits. Skipping breakfast is a sure setup for decreasing blood sugars as the morning goes on, headaches, and hunger pains. These patients then tend to snack on unhealthy foods in the late morning before lunch to try and catch up. I encourage my teens to at least eat ½ a banana and a piece of toast before heading out the door in the morning. They will be amazed on how much more energy they have as the day goes on. A good many teens also are living chronically dehydrated throughout the day. Rather than drinking water and milk, they tend to pick sodas and energy drinks if thirsty. These drinks often have a diuretic effect and lead to mild dehydration and showing up with symptoms of headaches and dizziness when standing. I encourage teens to try and drink between 32 and 48 ounces of water throughout the day. Again they will feel better and have more energy by simply hydrating regularly. It goes without saying that 5 servings of fruit and/or vegetables throughout the day are recommended. Fruits and vegetables are instant natural sources of energy and help the immune system fight illnesses and diseases.

The final area I try to get teens to focus on in creating a healthier lifestyle is a regular exercise. 30-45 minutes, 4 to 5 days a week of strenuous activity (bike-riding,

running, dancing, playing basketball) can make a huge difference in a teens sense of well being. Exercise helps your mind reduce stress, gives you more energy to get you through the day, and also promotes healthy sleep at night.

When mentioning these lifestyle changes to our teens, I am often met with some skepticism from the patient. “How could drinking more water and getting an extra 45 minutes of sleep a night get rid of my headaches that I have had for the past year” is a common response. With some gentle persuasion however many of these teens come back to the office 2 months later after implementing some of these changes with a different outlook. They are amazed that simply eating healthy, getting some regular exercise, and establishing some good sleep habits have transformed their lives. Something so simple but with incredible results!