

Sleep disorders costing us billions, national study reveals



Dr David Cunnington of the Melbourne Sleep Disorders Centre in East Melbourne.
Picture: Derrick den Hollander *Source: News Limited*

SLEEP disorders cost the Victorian economy an estimated \$1.2 billion a year.

This includes more than \$66 million for health care costs of the disorders and \$133 million for care of medical conditions attributable to sleep disorders.

It also encompasses \$1 billion for productivity losses and non-medical costs arising from sleep-loss related accidents.

The figure comes from a national study by sleep physician Professor David Hillman and psychology Professor Leon Lack.

Prof Hillman, from the Sleep Health Foundation, said there was an additional huge non-financial cost associated with the disability caused by untreated sleep disorders.

“The disruption of sleep and excessive daytime sleepiness that result from them can

severely affect our capacity to function effectively,” Prof Hillman said.

“Excessive sleepiness, loss of capacity to think clearly, slower reaction times and lower mood are examples of the sorts of impacts disordered sleep has on daily living for people who suffer them.

“These issues have been ignored for too long in planning preventive health strategies, which have looked at issues like exercise and diet while ignoring the importance of good sleep as part of a healthy lifestyle.”

One of the most costly — and common — sleep disorders is sleep apnoea, with as many as 80 per cent of adults with the condition undiagnosed. If untreated, it can lead to heart attacks, depression, stroke and diabetes.

Sleep therapist Matthew Foong said that anyone was at risk of developing sleep apnoea, in which your tongue and throat relax while you are sleeping, affecting your breathing and disrupting sleep.

“Traditionally partners are the ones who recognise it,” Mr Foong said. “If you close the bedroom door and can still hear the person snoring from outside that is a good indication.”

In the past, the treatment for sleep apnoea has been the CPAP machine — continuous positive airway pressure — a mechanical aid which creates pressure to keep your airways open.

But apparatuses such as the less bulky Provent patches, and even devices which are implanted under the skin, are changing the way sleep apnoea is addressed.

“Provent patches are placed over the nostrils. They allow air in but make it harder to breathe out. They create pressure inside the throat and keep it open,” he said.

A recent report by futurist Morris Miselowski found an increasing interest in “sleep gadgets” with 18 per cent of respondents using sleep-promoting smartphone apps, 16 per cent using sleep-cycle monitoring alarm clocks and 8 per cent using ambient

noise devices to encourage sleep.

Almost 70 per cent of people using devices said they had improved their sleep.

Melbourne Sleep Disorder Centre sleep medicine physician David Cunnington said “sleep gadgets” didn’t necessarily promote sleep but could help monitor sleeping habits.

Dr Cunnington said there were also apps offering cognitive behaviour therapy for another common sleep disorder — chronic insomnia.

“Psychology is a key aspect of addressing insomnia. Definitely some online modules are helpful for delivering cognitive behavioural therapy and it makes it accessible for people but it doesn’t work quite as well as a one-on-one with a psychologist,” Dr Cunnington said.

Sleep was an important restorative function, he said.

Dr Cunnington said there was no straight answer to the amount of sleep people should get.

“What I usually say is — think about a time in your life when you felt well-rested and healthy. Think about how much sleep you were getting a night at that time.

“If you are feeling well during the day you are arguably getting enough sleep.”

Dr Cunnington said sleep disorders could be caused by factors including depression and anxiety and the first step for anyone concerned about their sleeping patterns or snoring was to consult their GP.