This month, the “Take Charge of Your Health Today” page focuses on sleep across the lifespan and its effect on our overall health. Erricka Hager, health advocate at the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, and Esther J. Bush, presi- dent and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, spoke about this topic.

EB: Good morning, Ms. Bush. It has been a few weeks since our last health page. It’s nice to talk with you again, especially when we get an opportunity to chat about a topic that is meaningful to all of us, no matter who we are.

EB: Yes, Erricka. It’s great that you say that. Sleep is a topic that normally isn’t talked about as much in the African American community, especially of the young and relates so vitally to our health. We can all benefit from a better knowledge of the importance of sleep and how it affects us at various stages of our lives.

EB: Absolutely agree, Ms. Bush. Dr. Buysse has been saying it for years. Poor sleep contributes to a vicious cycle of poor health outcomes. Factors like living in neighborhoods with higher crime rates or having to work multiple jobs can contribute to Black Americans not getting enough sleep. Black Americans are suffering from a “sleep gap” due to unequal access to safe and comfortable sleep environments.

EB: Yes, Erricka. The study being conducted by Dr. Buysse and his team will be helpful to the communities we serve. I hope that our readers who are members of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh School of Medicine are testing a program that aims to help teenagers get more sleep.

EB: Special thanks to Dr. Buysse and his team for sharing this important information. Did you hear about the research on teenagers that Dr. Buysse did?

EB: Yes, the research on teenagers is model good sleep behavior. Parents can make it a part of their daily routine to get regular, appropriate amounts of sleep.

EB: Adult sleep needs also shift as they get older. Sleep is important to people of all ages. Sleep also critical for teenagers and young adults. Research shows that not getting enough sleep is linked to an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, obesity, depression, suicide and risk-taking behavior. A brain functioning on less than enough sleep has slower reaction times. “The art of good sleep involves the healthiest cognition of the brain,” says Dr. Buysse. “We need to get the right amount of sleep, at the right time of day and on a regular basis. Not allowing our bodies and wake time to vary too much can actually affect the body’s circadian rhythms and contribute to the sleep gap.”

EB: And what about older adults? What do they need?

EB: Daniel J. Buysse, MD, UPMC Professor of Sleep Medicine and professor of psychiatry and of clinical and translational science at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, says that sleep is important to people of all ages. Though babies and children may look peaceful when they (finally) go to sleep, their brains and bodies are working at their best. But most teens get seven hours of sleep a night and wake up later in the morning. On school days, this may mean that they get even less sleep. Teenagers who do not get enough sleep have even been rated as less attractive. Even though sleep is highly important to all of these populations, only 30% of teenagers get enough sleep. It is recommended that teens sleep eight to 10 hours per night, but 60% of teens sleep less than eight hours to get by. “Sleep is a right,” says Dr. Buysse.

EB: So we are all fighting to get enough sleep.

EB: Yes, we need to do more to get sufficient sleep to help us from our ADHD behaviors.

EB: I absolutely agree, Ms. Bush. Did you know that 60% of adults report problems with insomnia? The National Sleep Foundation says that adults need an average of seven to eight hours of sleep each night to function their best. But most adults only get six hours of sleep each night.

EB: I know the effects of not getting enough sleep can affect our health. It can contribute to an increase in poor sleep outcomes. People who get less than seven hours of sleep per night have an increased risk of heart disease and other cardiovascular diseases—both of which continue to disproportionately affect Black Americans.

EB: We’ve provided all readers with some great tips and advice for getting a good night’s rest. For example, for all this new information, I also saw Dr. Buysse noting that there are research studies being done at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. But also, our readers should know that the overall well-being and health of a community is highly important to us.

EB: What can our readers do to improve their sleep?

EB: That’s right, Ms. Bush. Poor sleep outcomes in night-shift workers are being linked to an increased risk of diabetes and other cardiovascular diseases—both of which continue to disproportionately affect Black Americans. Dr. Buysse is currently recruiting retired night-shift workers for a study to help professionals now lack a sleep clinic to provide poor health outcomes due to their sleep disorder or disability.

EB: Dr. Buysse reminds us that we should be your advice to folks reading this article, “Sleep across the lifespan and its relationship to mental health.”

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