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### **Season 3, Episode 1: From Rest to Results: How Sleep Shapes Your Health**

Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health and Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

**DeOnna Clark:** Well, hello, everyone, and welcome back to the Healthier You podcast, a podcast to help you live a healthier life. I am so excited to introduce Dr. Upender, a neurologist and the medical director of the Vanderbilt Sleep Disorders Center. Dr. Upender, we're so glad to have you on the podcast today. Would you mind sharing with us a little bit about who you are and how you got into sleep medicine?

**Raghu Upender:** Certainly. Thank you for inviting me to talk about a topic that's dear to me. I'm a neurologist and a sleep medicine physician. I've been in practice since 2000 and joined Vanderbilt around 2011. I spend most of my day seeing patients and overseeing the three labs located in Nashville, Franklin, and Lebanon. I'm also involved in the training of our neurology residents and our sleep medicine fellows.

**DC:** Awesome. Well, we're so glad that you're here with us today. And really, I'm excited about this conversation. It is especially close to my heart as we explore one of the most powerful and often overlooked pillars of wellness, and that is sleep. In our fast-paced world, sleep is often sacrificed in the name of productivity. I would love to start by asking, how does sleep actually impact our health, particularly when it comes to things like nutrition, physical activity, and stress?

**RU:** Yeah, it's a great question. I think of sleep as another pillar of health. Just like nutrition and physical activity, sleep is important for our wellness, both mental wellness as well as physical wellness. As you stated, we all know what sleep loss can do to our mood and mental clarity, but chronic sleep loss has been linked to many chronic health problems,

such as high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease, and even stroke. You may know that insufficient sleep is associated with weight gain, just as physical activity and poor nutrition. Sleep, exercise, and nutrition together help us better manage our stress. So definitely, I think you're on point when you say that we can optimize our sleep and then function better during the day.

**DC:** Yeah. Well, thank you so much for sharing that. And I think what you just shared highlights that sleep could be that missing component. You know, we know that physical activity, nutrition, stress management are excellent ways to manage a healthy weight and other areas of our wellness, but you're acknowledging that sleep is a big part of that.

**RU:** That's correct.

**DC:** Yeah. Well, one issue we hear about a lot, especially from healthcare workers is insomnia. Can you help us to understand what insomnia really is and why it seems to be becoming more of a common issue for high stress professions like healthcare?

**RU:** I'm glad you bring this up because insomnia is the most common sleep problem. And we see insomnia increasing, especially after the pandemic. So I'm glad we're bringing focus to this in this podcast. But basically, insomnia is a condition where you have difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, waking up earlier than you would want to, and any combination of these problems. There are many causes, but modern lifestyle plays a major role because our lifestyle, the way we live, really goes against the way our bodies are built and wired. All living things on earth evolved to cope with natural daily cycles of light and darkness. We went and messed with that by creating artificial light. It can affect the way our physiology operates. One of the consequences of messing with our circadian rhythm is insomnia, which can lead to reduced sleep at night, and this in turn leads to daytime sleepiness and performance deficits during the day. Another consequence is metabolic dysfunction that can lead to chronic diseases that we mentioned, particularly diabetes, weight gain, hypertension, and other cardiovascular diseases.

**DC:** Yeah, thank you so much for explaining that. That was very insightful just to understand how insomnia works. And with that and kind of knowing that when sleep becomes a struggle, many people may understandably turn to medications. But what should they know about the long-term use of sleep aids? And are there any other or more sustainable approaches that can help?

**RU:** Sure. Insomnia is definitely something that causes a lot of misery in those who suffer from it. And using sleep aids for relief is not unreasonable as long as it is for a brief period of time. The reason is long-term use of sleep aids has been associated with a number of harmful effects. First, the drowsiness caused by the sleep aids can linger into the day and

decrease alertness and attention. This can create a hazard situation when operating vehicles and other safety-sensitive tasks. Second, our bodies tend to get used to these drugs. They become less effective as time goes on, and we end up having to take more and more of the medication to get the little sleep that we do end up getting. Before long, we become dependent on these drugs, even when they're not really working to help us sleep. In fact, insomnia can actually get worse because of long-term use of sleep aids. So it's best to use these for a short term when there's acute insomnia and to avoid these drugs if you have a more chronic problem. There are other approaches than sleep aids. The best and the most important thing to do is change your lifestyle. Because oftentimes lifestyle is adversely affecting how you sleep. And by changing your lifestyle, you can improve your sleep. I have a three-step approach to helping people sleep better. The most important thing is wake up at the same time each morning. And this goes back to the circadian clock that we talked about. If you remember, circadian clocks synchronize each morning when we're exposed to morning light. By waking up at the same time each morning, we tend to get our circadian rhythm working properly. And the circadian rhythm really helps us stay active and alert during the day and helps us sleep at night. So the first step is make sure you wake up at the same time each day, both on workdays and weekends. The second step is to ensure that you're not spending too much time in bed. One of the biggest mistakes that people with chronic insomnia do is they end up spending more time in bed than they're capable of sleeping, with a false belief that the more time in bed, the more sleep. And that, of course, will help them in some way. But in fact, the opposite is true. Spending a lot of time awake in bed conditions them to be awake in bed, creating a vicious cycle. They can't sleep at night in their own bed, but then they turn around and fall asleep in inappropriate places and in inappropriate times. So, limiting the time in bed is important. I generally recommend for those with chronic insomnia and no other major health issues to limit time in bed to seven hours because most patients with insomnia have a hyper aroused brain and they are not able to sleep as normally as most people. They tend to function better with a little bit less sleep than the average. Currently, our recommendation is for everyone to sleep between seven and nine hours, depending on your own body's need. And since patients with insomnia need less sleep, you know, because of their hyper-aroused brain, you know, leaning towards the seven-hour time window in bed is better. The third step is to have an adequate wind down period before bed. A lot of us are very active late into the night, trying to finish daily tasks, whether it be household chores or related emails, or entertaining ourselves with streaming videos, social media, computer games, and so on. Often sitting in a brightly lit room, both the physical activity and the artificial light from screens are very stimulating and can interfere with our sleep signal and make it difficult for us to fall asleep. It's better to wind down in a quiet place with low indirect light, for at least half an hour or more before going to bed. I often recommend reading a boring book,

something that is engaging enough to keep your focus, but not so interesting that you want to finish the book and stay up all night. It's really important to read outside of the bedroom in a seated position. And if you have tendency to wake up and have difficulty falling back to sleep, it's really important to, again, get out of the bed if you're up for more than 15 minutes and read this boring book for 15 minutes or so, and then get back to bed. By doing this, you're avoiding staying in bed awake because that can become a vicious cycle, as I mentioned earlier.

**DC:** Thank you so much for sharing that with us. And I would love just to kind of acknowledge those working long hours or night shifts. What are a few simple evidence-based tips that can actually make a difference in their sleep quality?

**RU:** So because our bodies evolved to be active during the day and sleep at night, Night shift work can be very challenging. And the ability to adapt to night shift work really varies across the population and probably is linked to our genetics. And so those who can really tolerate it tend to stick with it, and those who don't, really get out of it very quickly. So there is a sort of self-selection. Generally speaking, in my personal experience, people who tend to be more alert and active during the night compared to the morning tend to do better with night shift work. Morning people, like myself, tend to have more difficulties with night shift work. There are optimal practices that would be difficult to cover in this short podcast for shift workers, but maintaining the same or similar sleep-wake schedule, both on workdays and off days is key. The more regular the sleep-wake schedule, the more likely your body can adapt to it. And the reality is, unfortunately, this is not always possible because of family and social obligations. So most people end up rotating their sleep-wake schedules, and those who work rotating schedules, where they're working days sometimes and nights sometimes have even bigger challenges. And, you know, we as a workforce and in sleep medicine, there aren't great recommendations on how to manage this in an effective evidence-based manner. There are certainly some things that help and some things are really not good. But, to really solve that problem, we just haven't been able to do it.

**DC:** Yeah, absolutely. Well, you are really highlighting some very common sleep challenges that our workforce may have. And with all of this, someone may be wondering at what point should they consider seeing a sleep specialist and what are some of the signs that it's time to get professional support?

**RU:** Well, sleep problems fall into two broad categories. On one hand, you have people who are sleepy during the waking hours. On the other hand, as we talked about in this podcast, there are people who can't sleep during their sleep period. I recommend that people first discuss their sleep problems with their primary care providers. The primary

care providers are in good positions to determine if seeing a sleep specialist would be needed.

**DC:** If you could leave our listeners with one key message about sleep and health, something that they can carry with them into their daily lives, what would it be?

**RU:** Well, if someone is experiencing excessive daytime sleepiness, they should definitely seek care because excessive sleepiness is a safety risk. I can't emphasize this enough. Many of our roadway fatalities are related to drowsy driving. So if you're experiencing daytime sleepiness or sleepiness when you're supposed to be awake, it's definitely something you should seek our help. We in the sleep medicine field tend to be better at diagnosing and treating excessive sleepiness than chronic insomnia. Chronic insomnia, in the absence of other sleep disorders, is best treated by behavioral sleep specialists. These are usually psychologists who specialize in cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia, or CBT-I for short. They use these techniques, which are proven to help with chronic insomnia, and the outcomes from the therapy are very similar to sleeping pills, and there are no side effects. So I strongly encourage people with chronic insomnia to consider cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia. There's a great book on the topic. It's called "Say Goodnight to Insomnia" by Greg Jacobs. Also for providers at Vanderbilt, we have a smart phrase for CBT-I resources, and we can leave that in the show notes if you like.

**DC:** Absolutely. Well, that was incredibly insightful. And I just want to thank you, Dr. Uffender, for joining us today and shedding light on the vital role that sleep plays in our health. Your insights remind us that rest is not just a luxury, it is a necessity. And by prioritizing sleep, we're not just improving our nights, but enhancing the quality of our days. So thank you so much for joining us again today. And ultimately, our mission here at Vanderbilt Health and Wellness is to empower individuals to make informed, healthy choices that support their overall well-being. And you have helped us to do that. So thank you for being here.

**RU:** Well, thank you for having me.

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