

Sleep and Sleep Issues among Missouri College Students

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 24 public and private colleges and universities in the state. The campuses in the coalition work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health concerns have on student health and well-being. This brief will focus on the sleep and sleep issues among Missouri college students and provide compelling data as to why sleep is a central well-being concern.

Background

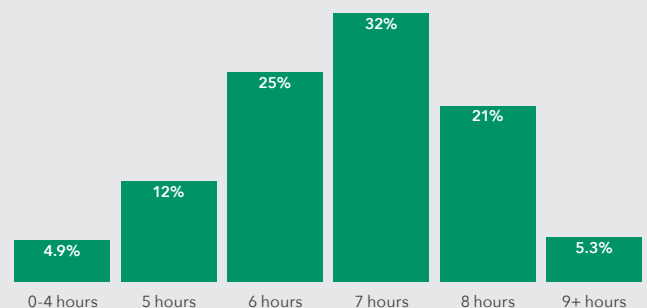
Sleep is vital to overall health and well-being; during sleep the body works to support healthy brain function and maintain physical health.⁶ Sleep is also important to support growth and development in adolescents and young adults and lack of sleep can be caused by, and contribute to, mental health concerns.³ Unfortunately, national data indicates that at least 60% of college students have poor quality sleep and garner, on average, 7 hours of sleep per night.⁴ College students may be at particular risk for low quality and inadequate amounts of sleep due to factors including stress (coursework, jobs, personal concerns), substance use (alcohol, cannabis, stimulants, and caffeine/energy drinks), accessing technology before bed (either for studying or entertainment), and poor sleep hygiene.²

Sleep

The average number of hours of sleep Missouri college students report getting on a typical school

night (Sunday-Thursday) is 6.68 hours. A breakdown of the percentage of students who report their typical sleeping hours is shown in chart 1, with the highest percentage of students (32%) reporting that they get 7 hours of sleep.

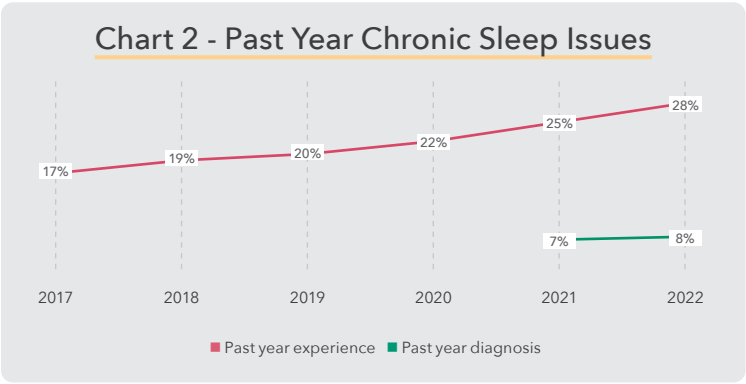
Chart 1 - Hours of Sleep on a Typical School Night



Chronic Sleep Issues

On the MACHB, students are asked to report past year experiences and diagnoses of various mental health concerns, including 'chronic sleep issues.' Unfortunately, the percentage of students who report

experiencing chronic sleep issues in the past year has steadily increased since 2017, shown in chart 2. The question about formal diagnosis of mental health concerns was added in 2021, but the survey results also show an increase in chronic sleep issue diagnosis between 2021 and 2022.

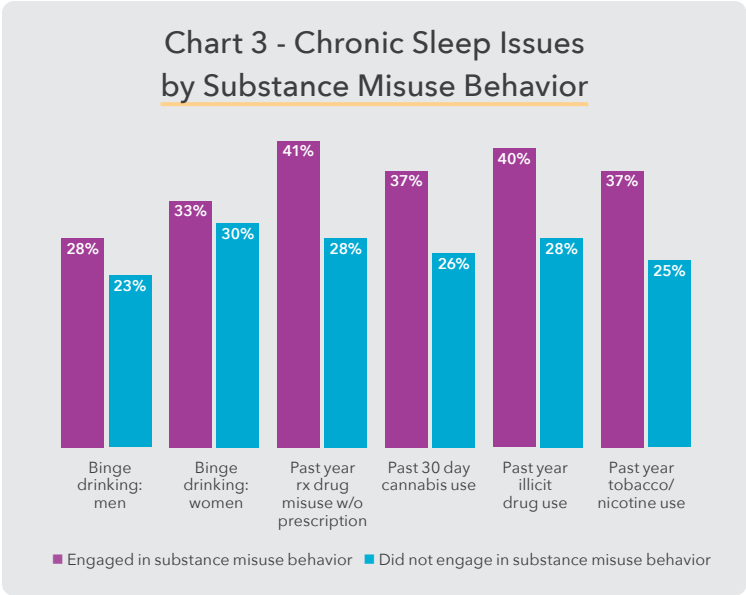


Sleep Issues and Substance Use

The relationship between sleep and substance use is complex and bidirectional; substance use can cause sleep issues and individuals with sleep issues may use substances to aid in falling asleep. Alcohol and cannabis in particular may cause feelings of relaxation and sleepiness but are associated with poor sleep quality and duration¹. Chronic sleep issues (such as insomnia and insufficient sleep) may also be a risk factor for substance use and substance use disorders because sufferers may choose to self-medicate to lessen the effects of their sleep problems using alcohol or other drugs.⁵

Overall, students who report engaging in substance misuse behaviors including binge drinking (consuming 4+ drinks for women or 5+ drinks for men in a 2-hour period at least once in the past 2 weeks), past year prescription drug misuse without a doctor’s prescription, cannabis use in the past 30 days, past year illegal drug use (including cocaine, heroin, ecstasy/MDMA, mushrooms/psilocybin, LSD, PCP, etc.) and past year tobacco/nicotine use were all more likely to report chronic sleep issues than their counterparts who had not misused (as shown in chart 3). The largest gap in reported sleep issues is among students who reported misusing prescription drugs

without a doctor’s prescription in the past year (41% of whom reported chronic sleep issues in the past year) vs students who did not reporting misusing prescription drugs in the past year (28% of whom reported chronic sleep issues in the past year).



Sleep Issues and Well-being

Overall, students who reported experiencing chronic sleep issues generally reported lower well-being measures. For example, students who reported experiencing chronic sleep issues in the past 12 months were more likely to endorse experiencing high level stress in the past 2 weeks compared to the statewide average (shown in Table 1).

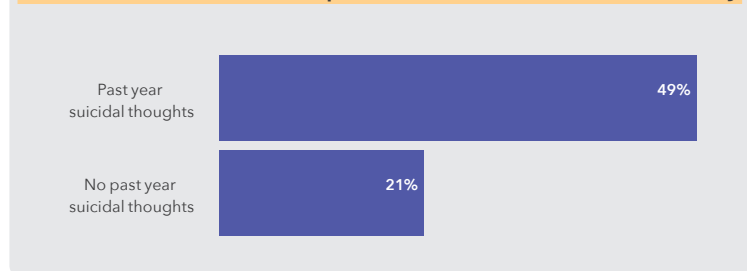
Table 1 - Stress Levels		
	Students with chronic sleep issues	PIP Statewide Average
My stress is overwhelming	46%	32%
My stress is unbearable	13%	5.9%

Additionally, students who reported experiencing chronic sleep issues in the past 12 months also reported experiencing other co-occurring mental health concerns in the past 12 months at higher rates than the statewide average across all mental health concerns (shown in Table 2).

Table 2 - Mental Health Concerns

	Students with chronic sleep issues	PIP Statewide Average
Depression	83%	55%
Eating disorder(s)	36%	19%
Non-suicidal self-injury/ self-harm behaviors	17%	8.3%
Anxiety	90%	70%
Panic attacks	49%	30%
Bipolar disorder	9.0%	4.3%
Other mental health concerns (e.g. OCD, ADHD/ ADD)	39%	24%
Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	22%	11%
Substance use disorder(s)/ dependency	8.3%	4.3%

Related to suicidality, students who reported experiencing suicidal thoughts in the past year reported higher rates of past year chronic sleep issues compared to students who had not had suicidal thoughts in the past year (shown in chart 4). Forty-nine percent (49%) of students who had suicidal thoughts in the past year also reported chronic sleep issues in the past year compared to only 21% of students who did not have suicidal thoughts in the past year but reported chronic sleep issues.

Chart 4 - Chronic Sleep Issues Related to Suicidality

Conclusion

With an increase in the percentage of Missouri college students who report experiencing chronic

sleep issues over the past few years, it's important to provide education and resources on sleep and sleep hygiene. Additionally, as substance use is relatively prevalent among college students, highlighting the association between substance use and sleep is vital. Sleep is also a salient topic that students are interested in talking and learning about and can be an opportunity to begin larger conversations about health and well-being.

Resources

Consider promoting resources like the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Foundation and sharing crucial tips for good sleep like setting a sleep schedule, avoiding electronic use before bed, and not consuming caffeine/alcohol/cannabis before bed. Partners in Prevention has a bulletin board on sleep that can be updated and adapted for your campus, and we can also create other resources and handouts to educate on sleep and sleep hygiene.

Contact Partners in Prevention at (573) 884-7551.

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References

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