Sleep Apnea or Insufficient Sleep? Both Are Costly & Dangerous

By Ana-Marija Dolaskie — November 30, 2016

Federal regulators are urging railroads nationwide to test train operators for Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA) following the recent deadly New Jersey commuter train crash, in which the engineer was later found to have the sleep disorder. The incident — including others in the past — has also prompted the Federal Railroad Administration to work on issuing a safety advisory on the importance of screening and treatment for employees who suffer from OSA. Currently, federal regulators are working on drafting rules that would require railroads to screen for sleep apnea, but government action could take years.

OSA is a disorder in which a person stops breathing briefly during sleep. It's caused by relaxation of the throat muscles, which results in blocked airways. Persons with sleep apnea generally stop breathing for at least ten seconds every hour during sleep, which affects daytime alertness and productivity. Moreover, sleep apnea can increase the risk of chronic diseases, diabetes, obesity, and depression. More than three million Americans suffer from sleep apnea.
The disorder is a common diagnosis in the transportation industry. In fact, the Metro-North railroad in the New York City suburbs — which already tests its engineers — has found that 1 in 9 of its train operators suffers from OSA. Those numbers are especially troubling, given that daytime drowsiness — which is a direct result of the lack of sleep that comes with sleep apnea — can increase the risk of accidents and mechanical errors. Sleep apnea has been attributed to a New York City train crash which killed four people in 2013 and a 2011 deadly freight train crash in Iowa, among others. It’s why airline pilots with sleep apnea are not allowed to fly unless their condition has been fully treated, and why regulators are also pushing for bus and truck drivers to be screened as well.

While sleep apnea accounts for more than three million cases in the U.S., Insufficient sleep, which is now so widespread that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently called it a public health problem, plagues between 50- to 70 million Americans. And according to research, the U.S. economy feels sluggish as a result. Researchers at RAND Europe analyzed several studies and found that lack of sleep among workers is costing the U.S. economy about $411 billion per year. Japan is not far behind, with $138 billion, and Germany loses nearly $60 billion a year, or roughly 1.56 percent of GDP, to lethargic employees. Sleep-deprived employees are more likely to report sick, or be unproductive while on the clock. Aside from general lack of focus and attention, tired employees are more likely to make mistakes which could cause industrial accidents, medical errors, or life-threatening mistakes.

How much sleep do we need?

The National Institutes of Health recommends that children need at least 10 hours of sleep, teens need 9-10 hours, and adults need 7-8 hours of sleep. But those numbers aren’t always attainable. In fact, according to the latest data, roughly 30 percent of adults report they get 6 hours of sleep or less per day, and only 31 percent of high school students report getting at least 8 hours of sleep on a school night.

Contributing factors

Late dinners, too much nighttime television and, undoubtedly, the rise of technology use before bedtime has made an impact on our sleeping habits. The National Sleep Foundation recommends adopting healthy sleep hygiene habits in order to improve overall quality of life. Among those: skipping caffeine later in the day, exercising daily, and practicing a consistent bedtime ritual that does not include your smartphone.