Staying awake for days on end? Unhealthy? [1]

Dear Alice,

Me and a few friends are planning on doing a fundraiser where we stay awake for five days straight. At first it was a great idea but I started thinking about if there might be some serious damage to our bodies for staying awake that long. Will there be any long term or short term damage for staying awake for five days? If so, is it safer to stay awake for 3 or 4 days?

And how long can the body really go without sleep?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Have you heard the saying, "If you can't take care of yourself, how will you take care of anyone else?" In your case, staying up for five days straight would most likely have an impact on your emotional and physical health. The short-term effects of sleep deprivation include fatigue, trouble concentrating, impaired decision-making, lack of motivation, impaired reaction times, and irritability. If sleep deprivation continues, a person may experience slowed or slurred speech, impaired memory, flattened emotional responses, apathy, and an inability to multi-task. As a person nears the point of falling asleep, s/he will fall into "micro sleeps" that last between 5 to 10 seconds (such as nodding off while reading or driving). Eventually, hypnagogic hallucinations will occur (the dreamlike sensations you have when falling asleep), which indicate the onset of REM sleep. It's kind of hard to help others when you are exhausted, apathetic, and nodding off during conversations.

In terms of the brain, research shows that sleep deprivation has dramatic effects on brain functioning, including impairing performance on high-level thinking tasks and shutting down the brain's language center. Studies also show that when people are deprived of sleep, they become less adept at mathematical and verbal tasks. Paradoxically, the more tired people are, the more confident they are that their performance is normal, when in fact it is worse.

It is not entirely clear how long a person can go without sleep, although a period of several days is probably the maximum. In 1965 a high school student set a world record by staying awake for 11 days in a row. In some research studies participants have stayed awake for 8 to 10 days in a row. These people did not experience any serious medical consequences, but they did exhibit serious deficits in concentration, memory, and cognitive ability as the period of their sleep deprivation increased.

The effects of sleep deprivation are not necessarily dangerous? unless you engage in
behavior where you may be putting yourself or others at risk, such as driving, operating heavy machinery, etc. If you need to stay awake for organizing the fundraiser (e.g. if you're running a 24/7 event over several days), perhaps you and your friends can sleep in shifts, so that one or two people are always awake yet you all have the chance to get some shut-eye. If the fundraising activity is solely the feat of staying awake, you will likely not experience any long-term damaging effects from staying awake for 5 days straight, although the effects listed above may be less severe if you stayed awake for 3 days instead of 5.

In any case, you probably won't be your coherent, competent, and awake self until you are rested and back to a normal sleep schedule. So when your event is over, make sure you get plenty of rest and don't drive yourself home!

Alice!
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Sleep [3]

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Published date:
Nov 30, 2007
Last reviewed on:
Jul 12, 2013

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