

Episode Title: Sleep

Summary: It's harvest season and during this busy time, farmers and ranchers may not be getting much sleep. In this episode, we talk with Susan Harris who works with Nebraska Extension, and Amanda Prokasky, a researcher from the University of Nebraska Medical Center. They talk with us about the importance of a good night's sleep, and what to do if that isn't possible when a farmer is up all night during calving season or rising early during harvest. They share some tips and tricks about how to rest up, even during the busy seasons.

Expert: Susan Harris and Amanda Prokasky

Episode Quote:

"Anybody [within] the agricultural industry knows that sleep is much different for ag workers."

– Amanda Prokasky, University of Nebraska Medical Center

Transcript

00:04 K. Crawford

Welcome to the FarmSafe Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, workers in agriculture and public health share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

In this episode, we're going to talk about sleep. It's harvest season and during this busy time, farmers and ranchers may not be getting much sleep. We asked our listeners how they manage their sleep this time of year. This is what one Iowa farmer had to say:

Speaker 1

How do I manage my sleep during harvest? Simple. I don't!

00:44 K. Crawford

To learn more about this topic, I sat down with Susan Harris who works with Nebraska Extension, and Amanda Prokasky, a researcher from the University of Nebraska Medical Center, to talk about the importance of sleep and about the research project they are working to understand how the quality and quantity of farmers' and ranchers' sleep is affected throughout the year.

S. Harris

Hi, I'm Susan Harris, I am the rural health wellness and safety educator for Nebraska extension.

A. Prokasky

And I am Amanda Prokasky. I am an assistant professor in the Education and Child Development Department at the Munroe-Meyer Institute at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

S. Harris

Amanda and I are interested in sleep, the process of sleep, how it affects us, how much sleep is everyone getting, and what that does when we don't get sleep. And we have collaborated on a project that's funded by Central State Center for Ag Safety and Health to do this study involving agricultural worker populations in Nebraska and surrounding states, to see what their sleep habits are during their busiest times, and during their other times.

01:52 K. Crawford

So, to start, why is sleep so important?

S. Harris

I always like to tell people that you should think of sleep as this umbrella, that's protecting everything in your life and your body. It impacts your function with physical health, with mental health, emotional health, safety, so many things that sleep does for us that a lot of us don't even realize. It has all of these systems in place when you're asleep that are taking care of your nerve function, your organs, it's repairing your muscles from the daily activity.

And it's also making us smarter. There's this process called consolidation, where it takes things that you learned during the day and cements them into your brain, whereas when you don't get that sleep, things are going to be flying out of your head, you're not going to remember them as well. And it also has an impact on safety in terms of how we make judgment calls if we do get good sleep versus if we don't get the sleep— which is extremely important of course in the lives of farmers and ranchers. And when they're not making good judgments and you are not being as safe as you could be that could lead to injuries.

03:00 K. Crawford

How much sleep do we need to get all of these amazing benefits that you just mentioned?

S. Harris

When you say “we” as adults, most of us need seven to eight hours per night. There are those few of us who can function on less, and there are many of us who say that we can. When actually, the studies have shown that those who say that are probably just functioning on high caffeine intake, and then not getting enough sleep and then high caffeine intake and sort of, they're not letting their bodies do the processes that they need to do. They're just surviving they're just getting through their day. Really, most of us should have seven to eight hours.

Now, the misconception that a lot of parents have that I have found is that they don't understand their children need so much more than this, and Amanda might be able to speak well to that topic because she's done some research on this, and the sad fact is the CDC tells us that they are not getting those hours of sleep.

03:54 A. Prokasky

Yeah, I guess I would just add that, echoing back to what Susan was saying, most adults do need about seven to eight hours of sleep, but it is individualized, it can be highly variable in between people. She's right in that the sleep needs across the age span are also different. Infants need 16 to 18 hours of sleep a day, toddlers 11 to 14, etc. And so, you get this, this gradual increase of sleep needs through adolescence and then once you kind of enter early adulthood, then those needs kind of decrease back to the eight, nine, you know, or seven-to-eight-hour range.

04:33 K. Crawford

Can we talk more about what happens when we don't get enough sleep? Susan, I heard you talking about this before, and you were comparing the effects of lack of sleep to being intoxicated and I thought that was interesting.

04:45 S. Harris

Yeah, one of my favorites that gets attention is how being awake for a certain number of hours is equivalent, or similar, to how you would behave if you were drinking. And so there have been several studies done on this, and the hours and the minutes vary just a little bit, but overall, about 21 hours of being awake, equals the legal intoxication level for Nebraska, which is 0.08, meaning if you've pulled an all-nighter and you haven't slept at all in 24 hours— you're wasted. It's a big warning that I like to give people especially those in the farming industry who were up all night. Think about that: you are out there, drunk, making decisions and doing things that could be dangerous.

A. Prokasky

Operating heavy machinery...

05:36 S. Harris

Yeah, not a good idea to do when you're drinking.

Something that I have found predominantly when I teach these programs, is the reliance on sleeping pills or melatonin. Wow. A lot of people do that, and you know I would like to hope that they would maybe opt for some more natural ways of regulating the sleep cycle, you know the sun, just getting that light in the morning and throughout the day has a lot to do with how we sleep at night, and these are things that maybe people don't think about. Taking a pill just shouldn't be the answer, and it can have a lot of consequences that we don't want— like that dependency, dizziness. It's not real sleep it's not allowing your body to do what it should do. It might make you just back to where you didn't want to be the next day and that groggy sort of hangover effect position.

A. Prokasky

Right, and so then it turns into a cycle, right? So, you're using caffeine throughout the day to keep yourself awake. Well, you've used too much caffeine, so you need a pill to help you fall asleep, which causes you to be groggy the next day, and so you're on the caffeine again and so it's a cycle that that is really, really difficult to break.

6:45 K. Crawford

You both work a lot with farmworkers, and you have this study, can you talk about what obstacles farmers and ranchers face when it comes to sleep?

A. Prokasky

Anybody with any association with the agricultural industry knows that sleep is much different for Ag workers and producers than it is for most of the general population. Because there are periods of time throughout the year where they're far busier.

At calving season for example, farmers and ranchers may be up every two hours throughout the night checking calves, and so they're not sleeping through the night. You know again planting and harvest times are also periods where farmers may be getting up really early and being in the fields all day long until really late, well past dark, and so they're getting a much lower amount of time to actually sleep. As opposed to those times throughout the year when, maybe, it's haying season where, you know, they may still be working all day in the fields, but the constraints on their sleep period, aren't as great. You know, or in the wintertime when there's not as much to do, they may be able to get more sleep during those periods.

7:55 K. Crawford

A couple of years ago at a farm show, a farmer shared the following story with us.

Speaker 2

I got rear-ended by a sleeping or drowsy driver. Sometimes during harvest, we have to work late and that is one of the risks.

K. Crawford

I shared the story with Susan and Amanda and asked if they thought this was a common issue, and if it's something they would expect to hear about.

08:16 S. Harris

Totally expected. I was just looking through my pictures the other day that I have, and I took one in Utah, where they actually have signs that say fatigued drivers, pull over to the side of the road. It happens that often. You know there are so many more accidents as a result of sleepy driving, than there are, as a result of drunk driving. Yeah, so not surprising at all.

A. Prokasky

Yeah, and it certainly, it happens a lot more than what people think. And if you think about particularly in rural areas where you've got a really long stretch of highway, and you're not seeing a lot of drivers coming your way, it's just even so much more dangerous, you know, because you don't have the stimulus of other drivers around you kind of jerking you awake. So, yeah, unfortunately that's happens way more than it should.

9:05 K. Crawford

What recommendations do you have about how we can get better sleep?

S. Harris

I have compiled my 30 best tips and tricks, and those can be found at go.unl.edu/sleep_tips. There's also a youth version, which is the same go.unl.edu/sleepy.

And the top three that make a big impact that have many people don't know about— number one is that light. I'm sitting here right now with my phototherapy light on which I've had on all morning because it's kind of cloudy today and it's kind of dark in my office and I want that light to come into my eyes in the morning so that I'm not lying awake in bed tonight. That light has a huge impact on how we sleep.

Also, temperature: many people don't understand that sleeping in a cool room helps you sleep better. Our bodies have to cool down in order to sleep well. That cooling is the signal to the brain, that it's time to produce the melatonin and get to sleep. So, 60 to 68 degrees sounds really chilly, but a cool dark cave is where we need to be sleeping. That and the consistent wake up time, super important to set that whole circadian clock in your body.

10:24 A. Prokasky

Good sleep hygiene which involves a good, consistent routine in the evenings, a consistent wake up time in the mornings, cutting off caffeine after 6 p.m., cutting off your exposure to blue light— so cell phones, tablets, TV, you know at least an hour, if not two, before bed to help ease that transition into sleep.

The problem, particularly for farmers and ranchers that we are seeing is that it's really hard to have a consistent schedule throughout the year, because of their particular work schedule so I just want to add that all of your sleep does not have to be at night.

So, if you're only getting four hours of sleep at night because it's harvest season, try to catch up and take some naps during the day. I mean, getting your sleep at night is, is the most optimal, but if you're not able to do that due to your work schedule, what's really important is getting those seven to eight hours in a 24-hour period, right? So, if you can't get it all at night, take a couple of naps during the day if your schedule allows, try to catch up, just so you're not finding yourself in that situation where you're up 21 hours and then all of a sudden, you know, intoxicated trying to do your job.

11:37 K. Crawford

So now can you talk a little about how your research and your study fits in with this issue of farming and lack of sleep?

11:44 A. Prokasky

Farmers and ranchers specifically, because of their work schedule and the nature of their work, there's times when it's just not possible to get a sufficient amount of sleep, and so we were really interested in understanding is there actually a true difference between the amount and quality of sleep that farmers and ranchers are getting during their busy peak production seasons—calving, planting, harvesting—and those non peak seasons, you know maybe early summer or during the winter. Then the next step is to really investigate, okay, is there something that we can do? I mean we can't change the seasons, right? We can't change when calves are born but are there other ways that maybe we can figure out how to improve the quality and quantity of sleep that farmers and ranchers are getting during those really busy times with the hopes of being able to identify if there is a way to either develop educational programs or outreach or something like that to help farmers and ranchers get more and better sleep throughout the year.

12:52 S. Harris

Overall, what I have found nationally in extension is that there is no sleep programming. I really looked and looked and looked before I began this type of programming, and it is just not out there. You know we promote nutrition, we promote physical activity, but we haven't yet promoted sleep. In Nebraska, we've been doing that now for several years, and we're serving as an example to the rest of the country, and I'm really excited to look at these data and use them to help formulate more education.

And part of our study too, that we didn't mention, is more subjective, you know, talking to our participants to say how if we do this kind of education for you to help you learn more about sleep and how to get better sleep, how can we best reach you, what's the best way to do that. And so that will be very helpful.

13:42 A. Prokasky

Because we know that farming and ranching is one of the more dangerous occupations, with a high rate of accident and injury. And so, this is really about investing in the health and safety of our agricultural workers.

K. Crawford

We have provided links to additional resources in the episode resources section of our website. Check out the link to Susan's Tips and Tricks for good sleep that she mentioned in this episode.

14:07 S. Harris

Listen in to the farm safe podcast to join in the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

K. Crawford

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there are any topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website at gpcah.org or email us.

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Episode Resources

- [Tips and Tricks for Better Sleep](#)
- [Youth Tips and Tricks for Better Sleep](#)

Photo

