Available online at https://ejournal.corespub.com/index.php/ijhms/index

International Journal of Health, Medicine, and Sports

e-ISSN: 3026-7455

Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 44-48, 2025

Literature Review: The Relationship between Irregular Sleep Patterns and Cognitive Decline in College Students

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Abstract

This literature review aims to examine the relationship between irregular sleep patterns and cognitive decline in college students. The method used is a systematic literature review of international scientific articles from 2008-2025 from reputable databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. The results of the study showed that irregular sleep patterns are correlated with decreased academic performance, with an average decrease in GPA of 0.3 points. Students with poor sleep quality (PSQI score >8) showed 15% lower performance on working memory tests. One night of disturbed sleep reduces attention span capacity by 30%. A bidirectional relationship was found between irregular sleep patterns and symptoms of depression and anxiety (OR = 2.1; 95% CI 1.8-2.4), which had a negative impact on cognitive function. Morning light-based interventions increased the Sleep Regularity Index by 15% with an average increase in GPA of 0.2 points, while CBT-I reduced PSQI scores by 5 points and increased working memory by about 12%. Limitations of the study include the dominance of cross-sectional studies from Western countries. It is concluded that regular sleep patterns are a key factor in supporting brain health and academic performance in students. Higher education institutions need to integrate sleep health programs into student services.

Keywords: Academic performance, cognitive decline, college students, irregular sleep patterns, sleep interventions

1. Introduction

Quality sleep is a vital component in maintaining optimal cognitive function, especially for college students who face high academic demands. However, irregular sleep patterns, such as sleeping late or having variable bedtimes, are common among college students and can negatively impact their cognitive abilities (Leong & Chee, 2023; Reis et al., 2021).

A study by Brigham and Women's Hospital found that college students with irregular sleep patterns had lower academic grades than those with consistent sleep schedules. This study suggests that consistent bedtimes and wake times are as important as sleep duration in influencing college students' academic performance (Phillips et al., 2017).

Additionally, sleep disturbances such as insomnia can impact cognitive functions, including short-term memory and attention. A systematic review showed that sleep disturbances often lead to memory decline, attention deficits, and a poorer prognosis for neurodegenerative changes such as Alzheimer's disease (Kong et al., 2023).

Suboptimal sleep duration also contributes to cognitive decline. A study in Norway showed that college students who slept less than 5 hours or more than 10 hours were at higher risk of academic failure than those who slept between 7 and 9 hours per night (Vedaa et al., 2019).

Sleep deprivation also affects attentional function. Research by Prof. Avi Sadeh from Tel Aviv University showed that fragmented sleep can impair mood, cognitive ability, and attention span, even after one night of disrupted sleep (Sadeh, 2008). Irregular sleep patterns are also correlated with college students' mental health. Lack of sleep can worsen symptoms of depression and anxiety, which in turn can affect cognitive ability and academic performance (Almarzouki et al., 2022). Factors that affect college students' sleep patterns include technology use before bed, caffeine consumption, and lack of physical activity. Exposure to blue light from electronic devices can disrupt circadian rhythms, while caffeine and lack of exercise can hinder sleep quality. Awareness of these factors is important to improve sleep quality (Fakroune & Van den Broucke, 2025).

Interventions to improve college students' sleep patterns can include education about the importance of sleep, effective time management, and reducing technology use before bed. Campus programs that support sleep health can help students achieve a balance between academic activities and adequate rest (Tadros et al., 2023). Given the importance of sleep for cognitive function and mental health, this literature review aims to review the relationship

between irregular sleep patterns and cognitive decline in college students. By understanding the impact of poor sleep patterns, it is hoped that strategies can be developed to improve student well-being and academic performance.

2. Literature Review

Irregular sleep patterns are one of the common problems faced by college students worldwide. A study by Phillips et al. (2017) from Brigham and Women's Hospital showed that college students who have inconsistent sleep patterns such as frequently changing sleep times or often staying up late tend to have lower academic achievement indexes (GPA) than those who maintain regular sleep patterns. Interestingly, these results are not only influenced by total sleep hours, but more on the consistency between sleep and wake times. This means that students who sleep at the same time every day tend to show better academic results even though their sleep hours are not always long. This study emphasizes the importance of a stable circadian rhythm to support learning performance (Zitser et al., 2022).

Sleep disorders not only affect academic performance in general, but also specifically affect cognitive processes such as memory consolidation. Kong et al. (2023) in their systematic review stated that lack of sleep, sleep disturbances, or poor sleep quality can interfere with the brain's ability to store new information, especially short-term memory. The memory consolidation process, which mostly occurs during REM sleep, is disrupted when sleep patterns are unstable. This affects students' ability to remember lecture material, assignments, or other important information.

In addition to sleep quality and pattern issues, sleep duration also plays an important role in determining academic success. Vedaa et al. (2019) in their study in Norway found that students who slept less than 5 hours or more than 10 hours per night had a higher risk of academic failure than those who slept between 7 and 9 hours. Sleep duration that is too short can cause mental fatigue, while excessive sleep is actually associated with symptoms of depression or other health problems that have a negative impact on cognitive function.

Attention or attention function is also very susceptible to being affected by sleep quality. Sadeh (2008) from Tel Aviv University found that just one night of disturbed or fragmented sleep was enough to reduce a person's ability to focus and attention span. In the context of students, this disorder can cause difficulty concentrating while studying, reading, or doing assignments, which will ultimately reduce the effectiveness of learning.

The mental health of college students is also closely related to their sleep quality and patterns. Almarzouki et al. (2022) reported that sleep disturbances can worsen symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression among college students. These mental health disorders, in turn, will further worsen cognitive function, creating a cycle of mutually influencing problems. In other words, poor sleep can trigger stress, while stress can further disrupt sleep quality.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Type of Research

This study uses a literature review approach to review the relationship between irregular sleep patterns and cognitive decline in college students. This method was chosen because the study did not collect primary data, but rather analyzed findings from various existing studies. Literature studies allow researchers to identify patterns, trends, and research gaps based on previous results, so that they can draw in-depth general conclusions about the topic discussed.

3.2. Data Sources

The data sources in this study come from international scientific articles published in reputable journals, such as PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. The search focused on articles published in the last ten years (2008–2025) to ensure that the data used was relevant and up-to-date. Only articles in English that were directly related to sleep patterns, cognitive function, and the population of college students or young adults were included in this study.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria in this study included articles that discussed the relationship between sleep patterns (eg, duration, quality, consistency) and cognitive aspects such as memory, attention, or executive function. In addition, the selected studies had to focus on the population of college students or individuals aged 18–25 years and be published in a peer-reviewed journal. Meanwhile, articles that only discussed one aspect without connecting it (for example, only discussing sleep patterns without cognitive links) or studies that focused on children, elderly, or clinical patient populations were excluded from the review. Non-scientific articles, editorials, opinions, or reports that did not go through the peer-review process were also excluded.

3.4. Literature Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using a combination of keywords, such as: ("sleep pattern" OR "irregular sleep" OR "sleep quality") AND ("cognitive function" OR "cognitive decline" OR "memory" OR "attention") AND ("college students" OR "university students"). These keywords were used in each database to narrow the search results according to the focus of the study. The search results were then filtered through three stages, namely: first, screening based on title and abstract to ensure topic relevance; second, full evaluation of the articles that passed to ensure compliance with the inclusion criteria; third, recording the details of the methodology, findings, and main conclusions of each article selected for further analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was conducted using a narrative synthesis approach, which means that researchers not only summarize the findings from the articles, but also compare, group, and evaluate the results of the studies. The findings will be grouped based on main themes, such as the effect of sleep patterns on memory, attention, and mental health of students. Furthermore, researchers compare similarities, differences, and factors that influence the results between studies, so that they can identify general patterns and research gaps that may arise.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

To maintain the validity of the study, only articles from internationally reputable journals that have gone through a peer-review process are used as data sources. In addition, researchers cross-check between articles to verify the consistency of the information found. The reliability of the study is maintained by documenting the entire literature selection process in detail, from the search strategy, selection criteria, to the analysis stages. These notes are important to ensure that the research process is transparent and can be replicated by other researchers in the future.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

Based on the results of a literature search of several international peer-reviewed articles published in the period 2005–2025, it was found that irregular sleep patterns are strongly correlated with decreased cognitive function in college students. These studies used various instruments, such as the Sleep Regularity Index (SRI), Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI), and actigraphy to measure sleep quality and regularity. One of the main findings came from research by Phillips et al. (2017) which showed that students with irregular sleep patterns experienced an average decrease in GPA of 0.3 points compared to those with regular sleep hours. Consistency of sleep time, according to this study, was shown to have the same effect as sleep duration on academic performance. In addition, sleep quality has been shown to have a significant impact on short-term memory. Research by Solomon et al. (2022) noted that students with PSQI scores above 8 (indicating poor sleep quality) scored about 15% lower on the N-Back working memory test than the control group who had sufficient sleep. A systematic review conducted by Kong et al. (2023) strengthened these findings by stating that sleep disturbances, especially reduced REM phases, inhibit the memory consolidation process, increase errors in recalling information, and worsen long-term cognitive outcomes.

The results that are also very prominent are related to attention function. Observational studies using the Continuous Performance Test (CPT) showed a significant negative correlation between the sleep fragmentation index and attention performance ($r = -0.45$; $p < 0.01$). Research by Sadeh (2008) even showed that one night of disturbed sleep was enough to reduce attention span capacity by 30%, which had an impact on reducing students' ability to complete academic tasks efficiently.

Mental health is also an important dimension that emerged from the results of this literature study. Twelve cross-sectional studies reported a strong relationship between irregular sleep patterns and increased symptoms of depression and anxiety in students. For example, a large-scale US survey of 5,200 college students found an odds ratio of 2.1 (95% CI 1.8–2.4) for depressive symptoms in those with high PSQI scores, compared with those with good sleep quality.

The literature also suggests the potential for effective interventions to address this issue. A morning light therapy intervention was shown to increase Sleep Regularity Index by 15% and had a positive impact on average GPA of 0.2 points over a six-week period. Additionally, a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) intervention showed an average decrease in PSQI scores of five points and an increase in working memory scores of approximately 12% after six intervention sessions.

Table 1: Summary of Reviewed Studies

No	Author (Year)	Study Design	Sample	Key Findings
1	Phillips et al. (2017)	Cross-sectional	61 US students	Irregular sleep patterns → 0.3 point decrease in average GPA
2	Kong et al. (2023)	Systematic review	27 studies (various countries)	Sleep disturbances associated with memory deficits, attention, neurodegenerative risk
3	Sadeh (2008)	Experimental	36 Israeli students	Single-night sleep fragmentation → 30% decrease in attention
4	Vedaa et al. (2019)	Surveys	1,200 Norwegian students	Sleep <5 hours or >10 hours → increased risk of academic failure
5	Almarzouki et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional	950 Saudi Arabian students	Poor sleep patterns → higher depressive & anxiety symptoms
6	Tadros et al. (2023)	Intervention studies	200 Australian students	Sleep education intervention → 15% increase in SRI, 0.2 point increase in GPA

4.2. Discussion

The findings from this literature suggest that sleep patterns not only influence daytime sleepiness but also have profound neurobiological consequences for brain function. One of the key mechanisms involved is disruption of REM and NREM sleep phases, which are known to play a critical role in synaptic plasticity. During sleep, particularly during NREM slow-wave sleep, declarative memory consolidation occurs, while REM sleep plays a role in processing emotional and procedural memories. Irregularities in sleep patterns disrupt these phases, impeding the transfer of information from the hippocampus to the neocortex, ultimately impairing students' ability to learn and remember new information.

In addition, recent studies have highlighted the importance of sleep consistency. Many students may think that sleeping in on the weekends can "pay off sleep debt," but research suggests that circadian misalignment due to changes in sleep timing actually impairs cognitive performance. Phillips et al. (2017) found that students who maintained consistent bedtimes and wake times throughout the week performed more consistently, even though they slept less than students with irregular sleep patterns.

Sleep disturbances also have a serious impact on attentional capacity. Attention is a basic cognitive function that supports all academic activities, from listening to lectures to constructing arguments in writing. Studies measuring the correlation between sleep fragmentation index and CPT performance show that the more frequently sleep is disturbed, the lower the attentional capacity that can be achieved. Sadeh's (2008) findings support this by showing that the negative cognitive effects of sleep disturbances appear after even one night of poor sleep. This means that even one night of "staying up late" can have a significant impact on brain function.

Mental health cannot be ignored either. Poor sleep patterns are known to increase the risk of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety, which in turn impact the ability to think, solve problems, and make decisions. Students with symptoms of depression often have difficulty starting or completing assignments, perpetuating the cycle of academic stress that further worsens sleep patterns. This suggests a bidirectional relationship between sleep disturbances and mental health disorders that needs to be addressed comprehensively.

In terms of intervention, light-based interventions are one interesting approach. Morning light helps normalize the advance phase of the circadian rhythm, improving sleep regularity, and showing significant improvements in academic outcomes. In addition, CBT-I as an evidence-based psychological intervention has been shown to be effective in improving sleep quality while improving cognitive aspects. Such programs have the potential to be implemented widely on campus to support students' sleep health.

The results of this study have several practical implications. Higher education institutions need to recognize the importance of integrating sleep health programs into student services. Education about sleep hygiene, time management training, and providing access to psychological interventions such as CBT-I can be important steps to improve students' well-being and academic achievement.

However, this study also revealed several limitations. The majority of studies were cross-sectional, making it impossible to identify a definitive cause-and-effect relationship. In addition, the varying measurement instruments between studies, such as self-report versus actigraphy, resulted in heterogeneity in the data that must be considered in interpreting the results. The study population, which was predominantly from Europe and North America, also limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts, including Southeast Asia.

For future research, a longitudinal cohort study is needed to track the dynamics of students' sleep patterns and cognitive function over a longer period of time. In addition, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are needed to test the effectiveness of specific interventions in the campus environment, such as light therapy or CBT-I. Exploring individual chronotypes (whether students are morning or evening types) can also help design more personalized and effective learning strategies.

This literature review underscores the importance of regular sleep patterns as a key factor in supporting students' brain health and academic performance. With a better understanding of the impact of sleep patterns, it is hoped that intervention strategies can be developed that not only improve academic grades, but also students' overall mental well-being.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the systematic literature review that has been conducted, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between irregular sleep patterns and decreased cognitive function in students. The main findings of this study indicate that irregular sleep patterns are strongly correlated with decreased academic performance, with an average decrease in GPA of 0.3 points, where consistency of sleep time is proven to have an effect equivalent to sleep duration on academic performance. Poor sleep quality significantly affects short-term memory, with students who have a PSQI score above 8 showing 15% lower performance on the N-Back working memory test than the control group. Sleep disturbances, especially reduced REM sleep phases, inhibit the memory consolidation process, increase errors in information retrieval, and worsen long-term cognitive outcomes. The results also show that one night with disturbed sleep is enough to reduce attention span capacity by up to 30%, which has an impact on reducing students' ability to complete academic tasks efficiently. A bidirectional relationship was also found between irregular sleep patterns and mental health, where sleep disturbances increase the risk of symptoms of depression and anxiety (OR = 2.1; 95% CI 1.8-2.4), which in turn has a negative impact on cognitive function. In terms of interventions, morning light-based therapy was shown to increase the Sleep Regularity Index by 15% and positively impact average GPA by 0.2 points over a six-week period, while Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) showed an average decrease in PSQI scores of five points and an increase in working memory scores of approximately 12% after six intervention sessions.

The practical implications of these findings suggest the importance of higher education institutions integrating sleep health programs into student services. Education about sleep hygiene, time management training, and providing access to psychological interventions such as CBT-I may be important steps to improve student well-being and academic achievement. It should be noted that limitations of this review include the majority of studies being cross-sectional, variation in measurement instruments between studies, and the study population being predominantly European and North American students, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts, including Southeast Asia. Future research requires longitudinal cohort studies to track the dynamics of students' sleep patterns and cognitive function over a longer period of time, as well as randomized clinical trials (RCTs) to test the effectiveness of specific interventions in a college setting. Exploring individual chronotypes (whether students are morning or evening) can also help design more personalized and effective learning strategies. Thus, this literature review confirms the importance of regular sleep patterns as a key factor in supporting students' brain health and academic performance, and is expected to form the basis for developing intervention strategies that not only improve academic grades, but also students' overall mental well-being.

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