International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Operating Publisher
SciFormat Publishing Inc.
ISNI: 0000 0005 1449 8214

2734 17 Avenue SW,
Calgary, Alberta, T3E0A7,
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+15878858911
editorial-office@sciformat.ca

ARTICLE TITLE	THE IMPACT OF SLEEP DEPRIVATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY: A REVIEW OF THE LATEST RESEARCH
DOI	https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.2(50).2026.6020
RECEIVED	13 March 2026
ACCEPTED	15 June 2026
PUBLISHED	26 June 2026
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THE IMPACT OF SLEEP DEPRIVATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF OBESITY: A REVIEW OF THE LATEST RESEARCH

Nicol Szerenos *(Corresponding Author, Email: nicolszerenos@gmail.com)*
Szpital Morski im. PCK, Gdynia, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0009-2754-8344

Daria Trocka
COPERNICUS Podmiot Leczniczy Sp. z o.o., Szpital św. Wojciecha w Gdańsku, Gdańsk, Poland
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9684-5881

Natalia Woroniecka
Samodzielny Publiczny Zakład Opieki Zdrowotnej MSWiA w Gdańsku, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0006-4713-4526

Luiza Stadnik
Szpital św. Wojciecha Copernicus PL Sp. z o.o., Gdańsk, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0009-6854-4905

Karolina Przybysz
Szpital Morski im. PCK, Gdynia, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0002-9001-829X

Alicja Kozłowska
Szpital Morski im. PCK, Gdynia, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0000-5991-7401

Jakub Dzwonkowski
Szpital Wojewódzki im. Mikołaja Kopernika, Koszalin, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0006-5087-0698

Adela Dzwonkowska
Szpitale Tczewskie S.A., Tczew, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0004-7026-7437

Jarosław Rachoń
Uniwersyteckie Centrum Kliniczne, Gdańsk, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0007-9691-2221

Natalia Zienkiewicz
Szpital Morski im. PCK, Gdynia, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0009-3380-0470

ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study is to analyze the current state of knowledge regarding the relationship between sleep deprivation and the risk of obesity progression, with particular emphasis on the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms and the therapeutic potential of interventions aimed at optimizing both the quality and duration of sleep.
Materials and Methods: This review is based on an analysis of contemporary medical literature, including epidemiological data, meta-analyses of prospective cohort studies, and findings from experimental and clinical intervention studies published up to 2026.
Results: The available body of evidence indicates a significant, non-linear J-shaped relationship between sleep duration and body mass index (BMI). Sleep lasting 7–8 hours per night is considered optimal for protection against excessive weight gain, whereas shorter sleep duration is associated with up to a 55% increase in the risk of obesity. The key mechanisms underlying this association include hormonal dysregulation within the ghrelin–leptin axis, characterized by elevated levels of the orexigenic hormone ghrelin and reduced levels of the satiety hormone leptin, resulting in direct stimulation of hunger centers. This phenomenon is accompanied by disturbances in energy homeostasis, manifested by an increase in daily energy intake of approximately 250–300 kcal without a corresponding compensatory increase in energy expenditure. At the metabolic level, reduced insulin sensitivity of peripheral tissues and a tendency toward preferential accumulation of intra-abdominal adipose tissue have been observed, promoting the development of visceral obesity. These processes are further amplified by neurobiological mechanisms, including heightened responsiveness of the brain's reward system to highly caloric food stimuli, leading to impaired control over energy intake. Furthermore, evidence from intervention studies suggests that extending sleep duration in overweight individuals may result in a statistically significant reduction in spontaneous caloric consumption, averaging approximately 270 kcal per day.
Conclusions: Sleep deprivation represents a significant, modifiable, and independent risk factor for obesity and its associated cardiometabolic disorders. In light of the available scientific evidence, routine assessment of sleep duration and quality should be incorporated into obesity diagnostic protocols. Sleep hygiene should be recognized as a third fundamental pillar of obesity prevention and treatment strategies, alongside dietary therapy and physical activity.

KEYWORDS

Obesity, Sleep Deprivation, Metabolic Regulation, Appetite Hormones, Health Prevention

CITATION

Nicol Szerenos, Daria Trocka, Natalia Woroniecka, Luiza Stadnik, Karolina Przybysz, Alicja Kozłowska, Jakub Dzwonkowski, Adela Dzwonkowska, Jarosław Rachoń, Natalia Zienkiewicz. (2026) The Impact of Sleep Deprivation on the Development of Obesity: a Review of the Latest Research. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 2(50). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.2(50).2026.6020

Introduction

Obesity constitutes one of the most significant public health challenges of the twenty-first century. It is defined as a chronic, relapsing metabolic disease characterized by excessive accumulation of adipose tissue, leading to impaired physiological function and an increased risk of cardiovascular, metabolic, endocrine, and neoplastic complications [1,2]. In adults, obesity is commonly diagnosed when body mass index (BMI) reaches or exceeds 30 kg/m²; however, contemporary clinical paradigms emphasize the limited diagnostic value of BMI alone and highlight the need to assess body fat distribution, obesity-related complications, and the degree of metabolic dysfunction [2]. In the pediatric population, diagnosis is based on age- and sex-specific BMI percentile charts [3].

In recent years, the understanding of obesity pathogenesis has evolved considerably. Obesity is no longer viewed solely as a consequence of positive energy balance or as an aesthetic concern; instead, it is recognized as a complex disease resulting from interactions among genetic, hormonal, environmental, behavioral, and psychosocial factors [2,4]. The American Association of Clinical Endocrinology (AACE) employs the term *adiposity-based chronic disease* (ABCD), emphasizing excess adipose tissue as the primary source of obesity-related health complications and underscoring the necessity for long-term, multidimensional therapeutic management [2].

The prevalence of obesity continues to increase worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the occurrence of overweight and obesity is steadily rising among both adults and children. Particularly concerning is the rapid increase in obesity during childhood and adolescence, as excessive body weight in early life strongly predicts the persistence of obesity into adulthood and the premature onset of metabolic complications [1,3]. Furthermore, obesity imposes a substantial economic burden due to the treatment costs associated with type 2 diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular diseases, metabolic dysfunction–associated fatty liver disease, and obesity-related cancers [1,4].

Parallel to the obesity epidemic, industrialized societies have experienced a progressive reduction in sleep duration. It is estimated that approximately one-third of the adult population in the United States regularly obtains less sleep than the recommended 7–9 hours per night [5]. Sleep deprivation has become increasingly prevalent, driven by urbanization, shift work, exposure to blue light emitted by electronic devices, psychosocial stress, and irregular lifestyle patterns [6]. A growing body of scientific evidence indicates that chronic sleep restriction represents an independent risk factor for obesity, insulin resistance, type 2 diabetes mellitus, and metabolic syndrome [6,7].

Sleep deprivation is defined as a condition in which sleep duration is insufficient to meet physiological requirements or when sleep quality fails to provide adequate psychological and physical restoration. This deficit may be acute (short-term restriction), chronic (persisting for weeks or months), or qualitative, characterized by sleep fragmentation, reduced sleep depth, or impaired sleep efficiency [6]. Major etiological factors include insomnia, shift work, obstructive sleep apnea, circadian rhythm disorders, and excessive use of electronic devices during the pre-sleep period [6,8].

The association between sleep deprivation and obesity development is multifactorial. Proposed mechanisms include hormonal dysregulation characterized by increased ghrelin concentrations and decreased leptin levels, activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis accompanied by hypercortisolemia, reduced insulin sensitivity, and enhanced responsiveness of reward-related neural pathways, promoting a preference for energy-dense foods [7,9]. Moreover, fatigue resulting from inadequate recovery may reduce spontaneous physical activity, while prolonged wakefulness increases opportunities for food consumption, particularly during evening and nighttime hours [7,10]. Together, these mechanisms contribute to a positive energy balance and progressive weight gain.

The importance of sleep parameters has been recognized in current clinical guidelines. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends routine monitoring of body weight in children and adolescents alongside an assessment of sleep duration and quality as an integral component of obesity diagnostics [3]. Similarly, the American Association of Clinical Endocrinology emphasizes the importance of sleep hygiene, treatment of sleep disorders, and regulation of circadian rhythms within comprehensive obesity management strategies [2].

The aim of the present review is to provide a concise overview of the current evidence regarding the relationship between sleep deprivation and obesity development, with particular emphasis on the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying this association and the therapeutic potential of interventions aimed at optimizing sleep duration and quality.

Results

Epidemiological Evidence

Available epidemiological evidence consistently demonstrates a significant association between shortened sleep duration and an increased risk of obesity development. Meta-analyses incorporating numerous cohort and prospective studies have shown that individuals with shorter sleep duration exhibit a greater propensity for weight gain and tend to present with higher BMI values. A large meta-analysis including 36 cohort studies confirmed a dose–response relationship, whereby the risk of obesity increased progressively as sleep duration decreased [11].

Subsequent analyses suggest that this relationship is nonlinear in nature. A J-shaped association has been documented, indicating that both insufficient and excessively prolonged sleep may be associated with an elevated risk of obesity, whereas the lowest risk is observed among individuals sleeping approximately 7–8 hours per night [12]. Importantly, each one-hour reduction in sleep below this optimal range has been associated with an approximately 9% increase in obesity risk, highlighting the significance of even minor deviations from physiologically adequate sleep duration.

Meta-analyses of prospective studies have further estimated that individuals experiencing chronic sleep deprivation exhibit approximately a 55% higher risk of obesity compared with those maintaining normal sleep patterns. An inverse relationship between sleep duration and BMI has also been reported, with each additional

hour of sleep correlating with an average BMI reduction of approximately 0.35 units [13]. Collectively, these findings support the hypothesis that adequate sleep exerts a protective effect on body weight regulation, whereas sleep deficiency constitutes an important and modifiable metabolic risk factor.

Prospective Studies

The observations described above have been validated in large-scale prospective studies. In a long-term cohort investigation involving more than 60,000 adults, short sleep duration was identified as an independent risk factor for the development of obesity. During the follow-up period, incident obesity was observed in more than 10% of participants, and multivariable analyses confirmed a significant association between sleep duration and obesity risk that remained independent of other metabolic and environmental determinants [14].

Similar conclusions have been drawn from studies conducted in Asian populations, in which short sleep duration was associated with an approximately 21% increase in obesity risk compared with individuals sleeping within the recommended range (OR 1.21; 95% CI: 1.15–1.29). Notably, this effect was more pronounced among younger adults, suggesting that age may act as a modifying factor in the relationship between sleep deprivation and body weight homeostasis [15].

Furthermore, evidence indicates that obesity risk is determined not only by sleep duration but also by sleep quality. Individuals reporting poor sleep quality exhibited a significantly higher risk of developing excess body weight compared with those demonstrating normal sleep patterns. These findings suggest that disturbances in sleep architecture may carry clinical significance comparable to that of quantitative sleep restriction [16].

Factors Modifying the Sleep–Obesity Relationship

The relationship between sleep deprivation and obesity is not homogeneous across population groups. The strongest associations have been observed among individuals with extremely short sleep duration (≤4 hours per night); however, elevated risk is already detectable at more moderate levels of sleep restriction, such as 5–6 hours per night. Evidence from the literature highlights the importance of sex-related differences, age, and environmental factors in modulating the strength of this association. In particular, women and younger individuals appear to be more susceptible to the metabolic consequences of inadequate sleep [13].

Alterations in Energy Balance

Experimental studies provide important insights into the mechanisms underlying the observed epidemiological association. Under controlled clinical conditions, sleep restriction has been shown to increase energy intake without producing substantial changes in total energy expenditure. In one experimental protocol, restricting sleep to 4 hours per night for 14 consecutive days resulted in an increase in daily energy consumption of approximately 300 kcal, while resting and activity-related energy expenditure remained largely unchanged [17].

Meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials have corroborated these findings, demonstrating an average increase in daily energy intake of approximately 250 kcal accompanied by a modest yet statistically significant increase in body weight. Importantly, these changes were not compensated for by increased metabolic activity, supporting the conclusion that positive energy balance resulting from excessive caloric intake constitutes the primary mechanism responsible for weight gain under conditions of sleep deprivation [18].

Hormonal Changes and Appetite Regulation

Among the principal biological mechanisms linking sleep deprivation to obesity pathogenesis are hormonal alterations within systems responsible for appetite regulation. Experimental sleep restriction has been associated with elevated circulating concentrations of ghrelin, a hormone that promotes hunger, alongside reduced levels of leptin, which mediates satiety signaling. This hormonal profile favors increased food consumption and impairs appetite control [20].

Notably, these changes may become evident even after short-term sleep deprivation and exhibit substantial interindividual variability. The available literature suggests that the magnitude of these effects may be greater among individuals with overweight or obesity and among women, indicating potential interactions between sleep deficiency and individual metabolic characteristics [20].

Glucose and Insulin Metabolism

Sleep deficiency exerts adverse effects on carbohydrate metabolism by reducing insulin sensitivity and impairing glucose tolerance. Experimental studies have demonstrated that even short-term sleep restriction can induce a transient state of insulin resistance, thereby constituting an important risk factor for the development and progression of metabolic disorders [18].

At the same time, findings from intervention studies indicate that the relationship between sleep and glucose metabolism is not entirely consistent. In certain research protocols, extending sleep duration improved subjective and objective measures of sleep quality; however, these improvements did not always translate into significant changes in insulin sensitivity. Such findings suggest the involvement of additional regulatory mechanisms influencing glucose homeostasis [21].

Adipose Tissue Distribution

An important aspect of the available evidence concerns the effect of sleep deprivation on adipose tissue distribution. Experimental studies have demonstrated that sleep restriction predisposes individuals to preferential lipid accumulation within the abdominal cavity, particularly in visceral fat depots, whose expansion is strongly associated with increased metabolic and cardiovascular risk [17].

It should be noted that these alterations in adipose tissue distribution may persist even after restoration of normal sleep duration and a normocaloric diet. This observation supports the hypothesis that even episodic sleep deprivation may exert long-term metabolic consequences.

Neurocognitive Mechanisms and Circadian Rhythm

Neuroimaging studies indicate that sleep deprivation induces enhanced activation of brain regions associated with the reward system in response to food-related stimuli, particularly those characterized by high energy density. This phenomenon may promote unfavorable dietary choices and contribute to increased caloric intake [18].

An additional factor of considerable clinical importance is circadian rhythm disruption, which frequently coexists with sleep deprivation. Desynchronization between the endogenous biological clock, feeding behavior, and sleep–wake cycles may lead to adverse metabolic alterations and an increased risk of weight gain [22].

Interventional Studies on Sleep Extension

Interventional studies have demonstrated that extending sleep duration in individuals with overweight is associated with a significant reduction in spontaneous energy intake while maintaining stable total energy expenditure. The observed decrease in caloric consumption, averaging approximately 270 kcal per day, may play an important role in long-term body weight regulation [23]. These findings support the consideration of sleep extension as a potentially valuable component of preventive and therapeutic strategies for obesity management.

Discussion

The findings presented herein support the hypothesis that sleep deprivation constitutes a significant and independent risk factor for the development of obesity. This association has been consistently documented in numerous cohort studies, meta-analyses, and experimental investigations involving both adult and pediatric populations [11–13]. Contemporary evidence suggests that reduced sleep duration should not be interpreted merely as a marker of an unhealthy lifestyle but rather as an active contributor to the pathogenesis of metabolic disturbances leading to progressive weight gain.

The most consistent epidemiological observation remains the association between increased obesity risk and sleep duration below the recommended range of 7–9 hours per night. Population-based studies indicate that even moderate sleep restriction to 5–6 hours per night is associated with higher BMI values and a greater prevalence of excess body weight [12,14]. This effect appears particularly pronounced among younger individuals, suggesting that prolonged exposure to sleep deficiency from early adulthood may amplify the risk of subsequent metabolic complications [15]. In several studies, a stronger association has also been reported among women, potentially reflecting differences in hormonal profiles, circadian regulation, and the higher prevalence of insomnia observed in this population [16].

It should be emphasized that the relationship between sleep parameters and body weight is not exclusively linear. Numerous analyses have described a J-shaped association, whereby both insufficient and excessive sleep duration are correlated with an increased risk of obesity [12]. While the mechanisms linking

sleep deprivation to obesity are relatively well characterized, prolonged sleep duration may reflect the presence of chronic disease, depression, low levels of physical activity, chronic fatigue syndrome, or undiagnosed sleep-related breathing disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea. From a clinical perspective, these observations underscore the necessity of a comprehensive patient assessment and preclude interpretation of sleep duration as an isolated parameter.

Disturbances in energy homeostasis appear to represent the principal mechanism underlying the association between sleep deficiency and obesity. Experimental studies have demonstrated that sleep restriction increases spontaneous energy intake without a corresponding increase in total energy expenditure [17,18]. The caloric surplus observed under conditions of sleep deprivation typically ranges between 200 and 300 kcal per day, which, over extended periods, may contribute to progressive weight gain. Furthermore, fatigue resulting from inadequate recovery may reduce spontaneous physical activity, decrease daily step counts, and promote sedentary behaviors [23].

Hormonal determinants of appetite regulation also play a substantial role. Reduced sleep duration has been associated with increased concentrations of ghrelin, an orexigenic peptide, and decreased levels of leptin, a key satiety signal [19]. These hormonal alterations contribute to heightened subjective hunger, increased frequency of snacking episodes, and a preference for energy-dense foods. Importantly, evidence indicates that such disturbances may become evident after only a few nights of restricted sleep, highlighting the rapid influence of sleep on metabolic homeostasis [24].

Another important pathophysiological aspect concerns the effects of sleep deprivation on glucose metabolism. Under controlled conditions, sleep restriction has been shown to impair peripheral insulin sensitivity, increase postprandial glycemia, and enhance activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis [20,24]. Persistent exposure to these abnormalities may predispose individuals to prediabetes, type 2 diabetes mellitus, and metabolic syndrome, emphasizing the need to consider sleep deficiency within the broader framework of cardiometabolic risk factors.

Particular attention should also be directed toward the influence of sleep architecture on adipose tissue distribution. Imaging studies have demonstrated that sleep restriction promotes preferential accumulation of visceral adipose tissue, even in the presence of relatively modest increases in total body weight [17]. Visceral fat is characterized by high metabolic and pro-inflammatory activity, and its excess is strongly associated with atherosclerosis, arterial hypertension, and metabolic dysfunction–associated fatty liver disease. Consequently, the adverse consequences of sleep deprivation may be underestimated when assessment relies solely on BMI without evaluation of body composition.

Increasing attention has been devoted to neurocognitive mechanisms. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies have demonstrated that sleep deprivation is associated with heightened activation of reward-related brain regions, particularly the nucleus accumbens and orbitofrontal cortex, in response to food-related stimuli [25]. Simultaneously, reduced activity has been observed in regions responsible for impulse control and executive decision-making. This pattern of neural activation favors the selection of highly palatable, calorie-dense foods rich in simple sugars and saturated fats while impairing adherence to dietary recommendations.

Circadian rhythm disruption, which frequently coexists with sleep deficiency, represents an additional pathogenic mechanism of considerable importance. Irregular sleep schedules, shift work, nighttime exposure to artificial light, and delayed meal timing interfere with the functioning of biological oscillators, affecting the secretion of melatonin, cortisol, and incretin hormones [21,26]. These disturbances may impair glucose tolerance, increase evening appetite, and reduce metabolic efficiency. Accordingly, current evidence suggests that not only sleep duration but also sleep regularity and alignment with the natural circadian cycle are critical determinants of metabolic health.

Further support for a causal relationship is provided by intervention studies demonstrating that extending sleep duration in individuals with excess body weight results in reduced energy intake and improvements in overall dietary quality [22]. Some reports have additionally documented favorable effects on blood pressure, inflammatory markers, and glycemic control following improvements in sleep parameters [20,27]. Despite these promising observations, a shortage of long-term studies evaluating the sustained effects of sleep optimization on body weight reduction remains evident.

Several limitations of the current evidence base should be acknowledged. In many studies, sleep duration has been assessed through self-reported measures, introducing the possibility of information bias. Reverse causality must also be considered, as obesity itself contributes to sleep disturbances, including sleep fragmentation and obstructive sleep apnea. Furthermore, the relationship between sleep and body weight may

be influenced by genetic, social, and environmental factors that are difficult to control fully in observational studies [28].

From a clinical perspective, the available evidence supports the incorporation of sleep assessment into the routine diagnostic evaluation of individuals with overweight and obesity. Medical history taking should include the evaluation of sleep duration, quality, and regularity, as well as the presence of symptoms such as snoring, apneic episodes, insomnia, and excessive daytime sleepiness. Interventions targeting sleep hygiene, treatment of insomnia and obstructive sleep apnea, and stabilization of circadian rhythms may substantially enhance the effectiveness of standard obesity management strategies.

In summary, the accumulated evidence indicates that sleep deprivation represents a major, modifiable risk factor for obesity. The mechanisms underlying this association encompass hormonal dysregulation, positive energy balance, reduced insulin sensitivity, adverse neurobehavioral changes, and circadian misalignment. In accordance with contemporary clinical paradigms, sleep should be regarded as an integral pillar of obesity prevention and treatment, complementing nutritional interventions, physical activity, and behavioral support.

Conclusions

The accumulated body of evidence derived from epidemiological, prospective, and experimental studies supports the conclusion that sleep deprivation constitutes a significant, independent, and modifiable risk factor for the development of obesity. The high consistency of data obtained from numerous meta-analyses and cohort studies confers substantial clinical validity to this association, in accordance with the principles of evidence-based medicine (EBM) [11–13].

The relationship between sleep duration and obesity risk exhibits a nonlinear pattern (J-shaped curve), with the lowest risk observed in individuals obtaining approximately 7–8 hours of nocturnal sleep per day. Both chronic sleep restriction and excessive sleep duration have been associated with an increased incidence of metabolic disturbances, emphasizing the importance of optimizing sleep duration rather than merely extending sleep time [12].

The pathophysiological mechanisms underlying the association between sleep deprivation and obesity are multifactorial and well documented. They include dysregulation of appetite-controlling hormones (increased ghrelin levels accompanied by decreased leptin concentrations), heightened activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis, development of a positive energy balance due to increased caloric intake, reduced insulin sensitivity, neurocognitive alterations favoring the selection of energy-dense foods, and disruption of circadian rhythms [17–20,22,25].

The primary observed biological outcome is a positive energy balance. Data from experimental studies and meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials indicate that sleep restriction increases energy intake by approximately 200–300 kcal per day, without a compensatory increase in energy expenditure, thereby leading to progressive weight gain over time [17,18].

Sleep deficiency negatively affects the metabolic quality of weight gain by promoting preferential accumulation of visceral adipose tissue and impairing glucose homeostasis. These alterations increase the risk of cardiometabolic diseases independently of absolute BMI values [17,20].

Findings from interventional studies suggest that extending sleep duration in individuals with sleep deficits may reduce spontaneous energy intake and improve dietary quality, highlighting the importance of sleep-targeted interventions as a supportive component in obesity treatment strategies [23]. However, a lack of long-term prospective studies evaluating the durability of this effect over time remains evident.

The strength of the association between sleep parameters and obesity is modulated by demographic and environmental factors, such as age, sex, lifestyle, and coexisting sleep-related disorders. Particular importance is attributed to obstructive sleep apnea and circadian rhythm disruption, both of which may exacerbate metabolic dysfunction and promote weight gain [21,26].

Limitations of the current state of knowledge include the widespread use of subjective sleep assessment methods, the potential for reverse causality, and the difficulty in fully eliminating confounding factors. Nevertheless, the convergence of findings from observational and experimental studies provides strong evidence supporting the clinical relevance of this association [28].

From a practical standpoint, both quantitative and qualitative assessment of sleep should be considered an integral component of diagnostic and therapeutic management in overweight and obese patients. Interventions aimed at improving sleep hygiene, treating insomnia, managing sleep-disordered breathing, and stabilizing circadian rhythms may enhance the effectiveness of standard obesity treatment protocols.

In public health terms, improvement of sleep parameters should be recognized as a key element of obesity prevention strategies, particularly in high-risk populations such as children, young adults, and shift workers.

Further high-quality research, particularly long-term randomized controlled intervention studies, is warranted. Such studies would allow for a more precise determination of the impact of sleep architecture modification on body weight reduction and metabolic complication risk, and would support the development of integrated and effective therapeutic strategies.

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