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Too Late and Not Enough: School Year Sleep Duration, Timing, and Circadian Misalignment Are Associated with Reduced Insulin Sensitivity in Adolescents with Overweight/Obesity

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Abstract

Objectives—To examine the relationship between insulin resistance (IR) and sleep/circadian health in overweight/obese adolescents. We hypothesized that insufficient and delayed sleep would be associated with IR in this population.

Study design—Thirty-one adolescents (16.0±1.4y, 77% female) with BMI ≥90 percentile for age/sex were recruited from outpatient clinics at a children's hospital. Participants underwent one week of objective home sleep monitoring with wrist actigraphy during the academic year. A 3-h oral glucose tolerance test was conducted, followed by in-laboratory salivary dim light melatonin

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Data Statement

Data sharing statement available at www.jpeds.com.

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sampling every 30–60m from 5pm to noon the following day. Regression analyses between sleep and circadian variables with IR were examined.

Results—Longer sleep time and time in bed on weekends and weekdays, and earlier weekday bedtime were significantly associated with better insulin sensitivity. Participants who obtained less than the median duration of sleep per night (6.6h) had evidence of IR with compensatory insulin secretion compared with those obtaining ≥ 6.6h. Wider phase angle between bedtime and melatonin onset, indicating a later circadian timing of sleep onset, was significantly associated with IR.

Conclusions—Short sleep duration, later weekday bedtime, and later circadian timing of sleep were associated with IR in a cohort of adolescents with overweight/obesity during the school year. Further research is needed to better understand the physiology underlying these observations, and evaluate the impact of improved sleep and circadian health on metabolic health in this at-risk population.

Keywords

Circadian rhythm; sleep restriction; insulin resistance; pediatrics

Overweight/obesity currently affects ~33% of adolescents in the United States.¹ Rates of related comorbidities such as type 2 diabetes (T2D) are also rising in teens and present more aggressively, with rapid onset of β -cell failure in youth compared with adults.^{2–4} Insulin resistance (IR) is a significant risk factor for T2D and adolescents with overweight/obesity are at particular risk. Insulin sensitivity (S_i) decreases by approximately 50% in all adolescents during puberty, and over half of teens with overweight/obesity also demonstrate further IR relative to their pubertal-matched lean peers^{5–8}. Weight-management interventions tend to be less effective for adolescents⁹, calling for alternative prevention and intervention targets for overweight/obesity and T2D in youth to prevent future morbidity and mortality.

Concurrent with the rise in overweight/obesity and pubertal effects on S_i , adolescents are at increased risk for poor sleep and circadian health. A physiological delay in circadian rhythms, coupled with increased academic and social demands, greater electronics use, and early school start times, result in high rates of insufficient sleep in adolescence^{10–12}. Up to 25% of adolescents obtain <6 h of sleep per night, well below the 8–10 hours recommended for this age group^{13–16}. Evidence in adults that poor sleep and circadian health results in abnormal glucose metabolism suggests that sleep problems may be a target for intervention. Specifically, prior studies in adults have demonstrated relationships between sleep measures and S_i . Habitually short-sleeping adults as well as those undergoing experimentally-induced sleep restriction demonstrated reduced S_i ^{17–21}.

Few studies examining the relationship between sleep duration and timing with insulin sensitivity have been performed in adolescents. Some studies found results comparable with adults with shorter sleep duration in adolescents correlating with lower S_i ^{22, 23}, whereas another found that this relationship was attenuated after controlling for adiposity²⁴.

Adolescent boys had reduced S_i after 3 nights of sleep restriction (4h per night) compared with 3 nights of extended sleep (9h per night)²⁵.

The goal of this study was to examine the relationship between S_i and sleep/circadian health, including duration and timing of sleep, and melatonin timing in adolescents with overweight/obesity. We hypothesized that adolescents with short sleep duration, later sleep timing, and later circadian timing would have worse S_i .

Methods

Participants were recruited from adolescent medicine and weight-management specialty clinics at Children's Hospital Colorado between September, 2014 and May, 2017 and enrolled in one of 2 protocols with identical measures except where noted below (APPLE cohort NCT02157974 and CIRC cohort NCT02585830). All participants were between the ages of 14–19 years and attending high school, with BMI 90thile for age and sex and were habitually sedentary (<3 hours of physical activity per week). To minimize the varied effects of puberty on IR, all participants were in late puberty, defined as Tanner puberty stage 4 or 5. Exclusion criteria included diabetes ($HbA_{1c} \geq 6.5\%$), anemia, prior diagnosis of obstructive sleep apnea (CIRC cohort only) and medications impacting IR or sleep. All procedures were approved by the Colorado Clinical and Translational Sciences Institute Scientific Advisory Committee and the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board. All youth and their parents provided appropriate informed assent and/or consent prior to participation.

Procedures

After a screening visit with a physical examination and laboratory tests (ie, HbA_{1c}) to evaluate inclusion/exclusion criteria, participants were given a wrist actigraphy monitor to wear for seven days at home prior to an outpatient study visit. Fasting laboratory tests were obtained and a 3-hour oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT) was performed to assess S_i . Participants were admitted to the Children's Hospital Colorado Clinical and Translational Research Center (CTRC) at 4pm and entered dim light conditions (<5 lux measured at angle of gaze) for the duration of the stay. Salivary melatonin samples were obtained every 30–60 minutes from 5pm to noon the following day. Participants from the APPLE cohort ($N = 11$) had only hourly-sampled evening and morning melatonin available. All studies were performed on Thursday or Friday to be consistent with the amount of accumulated sleep debt incurred over the week. Participants were scheduled in the follicular phase when possible, as menstrual timing can influence measures of S_i , sleep, circadian rhythms, and melatonin levels²⁶. Participants were also asked to refrain from exercising in the 72 hours prior to study, as activity can affect S_i .

Measures

Sleep/wake: Participants wore a Spectrum Plus actigraphy monitor (Phillips Respironics, Bend, OR), a watch-like device that estimates sleep duration and timing, on their non-dominant wrist for 7 days at home prior to their study visits. Participants completed a concurrent sleep diary reporting their bedtimes and waketimes and sleep start and wake

times were manually selected to facilitate accurate scoring of sleep/wake episodes²⁷. Total sleep duration, sleep onset latency, mid-sleep time (sleep midpoint), number of awakenings, wake after sleep onset (WASO), and sleep efficiency were calculated using Actiware Sleep v6 software and standard scoring rules and a medium sensitivity (Phillips Respironics, Pittsburgh, PA)²⁷.

Dim light melatonin onset and offset: Saliva (~1mL) was collected in 30–60 minute intervals in dim light (<5 lux in the angle of gaze, approximately the light level of candlelight or civil twilight; EasyView Light Meter, Extech Instruments, Boston, MA) from approximately 5pm until noon the following day. Participants were instructed to remain seated/lying (to avoid impact of position on melatonin levels) and eating and drinking was not permitted for 15 minutes prior to sampling to prevent sample contamination. Samples were centrifuged for 10 minutes at 3500 RMP and 4 ° C before transfer via pipette and then frozen at –80 ° C. Melatonin onset (DLMO_n) was defined as the linear interpolated clock time at which evening salivary melatonin concentrations increased and remained above a 3pg/mL threshold. Melatonin offset (DLMO_{off}) was the linear interpolated clock time at which salivary melatonin concentrations fell below this threshold. Later DLMO_n and DLMO_{off} are indicative of a later circadian rhythm²⁸. Phase angles of entrainment, a quantification of the temporal alignment between actual sleep behaviors with the internal circadian clock, were computed as the time interval between each circadian marker (DLMO_n and DLMO_{off}) and actigraphic estimates of sleep (bedtime and wake time)²⁸.

Insulin sensitivity: After an overnight fast, participants completed an OGTT in the morning. Participants consumed a 75-gram dextrose drink (76–78 grams in the APPLE cohort) and serum for glucose and insulin concentrations were collected at baseline and every 30 minutes for three hours. A fasting lipid panel was also drawn at baseline. The Matsuda Index, calculated as $10,000 / [(fasting\ insulin\ (\mu U/ml) \times fasting\ glucose\ (mmol/l)) \times [mean\ OGTT\ insulin\ (\mu U/ml) \times mean\ OGTT\ glucose\ (mmol/l)]]$, was used to estimate S_i ²⁹. The Matsuda index correlates strongly with the more invasive hyperinsulinemic-euglycemic clamp and has been validated in many different populations and disease conditions²⁹. HOMA-IR (homeostatic model assessment; $[fasting\ insulin\ (\mu U/ml) \times fasting\ glucose\ (mmol/l)] / 22.5$)³⁰ was also calculated. Additionally, the mean and area under the curve (AUC) for insulin and glucose concentrations during the entire OGTT were estimated using the trapezoidal method³¹.

Sleep-disordered breathing screening: The Sleep Disturbances Scale for Children (SDSC³²) was completed by the CIRC cohort only to assess for symptoms of common sleep disorders over the past 6 months. Items are summed and raw scores are converted to t-scores for each subscale; the Sleep Breathing Disorders subscale was used in analyses. The measure has demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Cronbach alpha = 0.71–0.79)³². The APPLE cohort had in-laboratory overnight polysomnography during their overnight study visit.

Laboratory Assays:

Analyses were performed by the University of Colorado Anschutz Research core laboratory or the Children's Hospital Colorado clinical laboratory except where noted. Triglycerides and HDL were analyzed enzymatically (Hitachi 917 autoanalyzer; Boehringer Mannheim Diagnostics, Indianapolis, IN). DCCT-calibrated high performance ion-exchange liquid chromatography was used for HbA1c (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, Calif). Radioimmunoassay was used to analyze serum insulin (Millipore, Billerica, MA). Melatonin was assayed using radioimmunoassay (Buhlmann Laboratories AG, Schonenbuch, Switzerland) at the Sleep and Chronobiology Laboratory at the University of Colorado Boulder.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics reported are: mean and SD for normally-distributed variables or median and min-max for non-normally-distributed variables. Sleep midpoint was calculated as: time in bed + [(time out of bed – time in bed)/2] and social jetlag was calculated as the difference between weekend and weekday sleep midpoints. Linear regression analyses were calculated to examine the association of continuous sleep variables with S_i variables. Independent samples t-tests examined differences in S_i variables for youth obtaining greater than vs less than the median sleep duration on weekday nights for the sample (6.6 hours). Statistical software (SAS 9.0 and SPSS Statistics 24) were utilized for analyses.

Results

A total of 31 participants met inclusion and exclusion criteria. Average age was 16.0 ± 1.4 years and the majority were female (77.4%); 58% were Hispanic, 26% African-American and 16% Caucasian. Average BMI percentile was 96.9 ± 2.4 , and all participants were in late puberty with either Tanner stage 4 (29%) or 5 (71%). Mean S_i as assessed by Matsuda Index was 4.1 ± 2.2 and by HOMA-IR was $3.0 \text{ mg/dl} \pm 1.8$. Table 1 (available at www.jpeds.com) lists all participant characteristics.

The overall cohort obtained insufficient sleep on both weekend and weekday nights (average total sleep time = $7.5 \pm 0.88 \text{ h}$ and $6.6 \pm 0.96 \text{ h}$, respectively) compared with the recommended 8–10 hours for this age group¹⁶. Sleep duration and time in bed were significantly longer, and sleep timing (bedtime, wake time, and midpoint time) were significantly later on weekend nights compared with weekdays. Table II shows actigraphy and melatonin data. Participants who obtained less than the median duration of sleep on weekdays had significantly wider phase angles between DLMOff and wake time ($P = .04$), indicating more time between melatonin offset and waketime, and more narrow phase angles between DLMOn and wake time ($p = 0.02$), indicating less time between melatonin onset and waketime, compared with those obtaining more than the median sleep duration on weekdays.

The average Sleep Breathing Disorders score from the SDSC was 53.8 ± 9.6 . This score was not significantly correlated with any demographic, insulin sensitivity, or sleep/circadian variable so was not controlled for in subsequent analyses. Of the participants with

polysomnography, mean apnea-hypopnea index was 1.9 events/hour and only 1 participant had an AHI >5. Analyses were re-run excluding this participant and results did not change.

Actigraphy and Insulin Sensitivity

Our analyses identified associations between several actigraphy-derived measures and S_i . Regression analyses between actigraphy and S_i variables for the cohort revealed that longer total sleep time and more time in bed on both weekend and weekdays, and earlier weekday bedtime were significantly associated with better S_i (Figure 1). Social jetlag (the discrepancy between sleep on school days and weekend days) was not significantly associated with S_i .

Comparing participants who obtained <6.6 hours of sleep per night with those who obtained ≥6.6 h per night revealed significant differences between groups for Matsuda Index ($t(26) = -2.9$, $p = 0.007$) and HOMA-IR ($t(27) = 2.4$, $p = 0.02$), with participants obtaining ≥6.6 h sleep having better S_i . Additionally, a significant difference was found between groups for AUC for insulin ($p = 0.03$), but not AUC glucose ($p = 0.2$), with participants obtaining ≥6.6 h sleep having a lower insulin AUC (Figure 2).

Melatonin and Insulin Sensitivity

Regression analyses between melatonin and S_i variables show that shorter phase angles between weekday bedtime and DLMOn, indicating sleep onset at an earlier circadian time, were significantly associated with better S_i (HOMA: $\beta = 0.44$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = 0.03$). Greater phase angles between weekday bedtime and DLMOff were also significantly associated with better S_i (Matsuda: $\beta = 0.46$, $SE = 0.38$, $p = 0.019$; HOMA: $\beta = -0.65$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) and reflect longer sleep duration during the biological night. Regression analyses between DLMOn, DLMOff, and waketime phase angles were not significant ($p > 0.05$) (Figure 3).

Discussion

In our sample of adolescents with overweight/obesity during the academic year, we found significant associations between sleep and circadian variables with S_i . Specifically, participants obtaining more sleep, spending more time in bed on both weekends and weekdays, and having earlier weekday bedtimes had better S_i . Going to sleep at a later circadian time was associated with worse S_i . These findings confirm our hypotheses and are consistent with the extant adult literature. Moreover, this study adds to the pediatric literature by examining objectively measured sleep and circadian rhythm in adolescents with overweight/obesity in the home environment with strict controls to minimize influences on S_i (eg, physical activity, weight status, menstrual cycle).

Typical imposed early school start times coupled with the “eveningness” tendency of adolescence limit teens’ ability to sleep longer and contribute to insufficient sleep duration. Indeed, our cohort had a school night sleep duration that was on average ~1.5 hours below the minimum number of hours of sleep recommended for adolescents. Moreover, short sleep duration was significantly associated with impaired S_i in our cohort. Other studies using community samples of both healthy teens and obese youth have also found that short sleep duration is associated with reduced S_i in adolescents^{22, 23, 25, 33}, with some studies also

demonstrating that long sleep duration is associated with impaired glucose homeostasis, suggesting a “u-shaped” relationship between sleep duration and S_i ^{24, 34}. In contrast, a large clinical sample of obese adolescents failed to find a relationship between sleep duration and metabolic measures³⁵. However, these studies have limitations in their sleep assessment methodology including examining sleep based on self-report, considering only a single night of polysomnography, or imposing laboratory-based sleep restriction paradigms not typical of adolescent’s sleep in a school week. Our sleep data, recorded over a full week in the home setting, confirms that sleep duration was salient with regards to S_i in adolescents with overweight/obesity. Further, we controlled for many confounding variables such as physical activity, weight status, and menstrual cycle, and performed metabolic studies at the end of a school week which may have enhanced our ability to detect associations between sleep/ circadian health and S_i .

Our finding that later weekday bedtimes, especially bedtimes occurring later with respect to DLMOn, are associated with reduced S_i is alarming given that adolescents have an increased propensity for a delayed sleep phase and eveningness preference. In a sample of pre-adolescents (ages 10–13 years), late estimated chronotype as assessed by sleep midpoint on free days and self-report questionnaire was correlated with higher fasting plasma glucose independent of weight status³⁶. Late chronotype has been associated with metabolic disorders and increased morbidity in adults³⁷. Furthermore, shift work in adults has been associated with increased risk of metabolic disorders³⁸, and experimentally induced circadian misalignment (imposed wakefulness occurring during the biological night) in a sample of adults resulted in lower S_i ³⁹. These metabolic effects are hypothesized to be caused, in part, due to a mismatch between circadian rhythm and sleep timing.³⁸ Although the relationship between phase angle of waketime and melatonin offset was not significantly associated with S_i , this may reflect the reduced level of control that teens have over waketime compared with bedtime during the academic year. This study utilized objective measurement of circadian rhythm with salivary melatonin assessment to investigate associations with S_i in this population. Further research on the effects of sleep and circadian timing on S_i is needed in adolescents to determine whether common societal challenges to sleep, such as early school start times, may adversely impact the cardiometabolic health of adolescents.

Sleep duration, timing, and melatonin variables for participants in the current sample were similar to the study by Crowley et al of 13–16 year-olds during the school year⁴⁰. We found significant differences in actigraphy variables between sleep on weekdays and weekends in our cohort. Increased duration of sleep on weekends suggests that adolescents may be trying to compensate for weekday sleep restriction. Later timing of sleep on weekends is consistent with the increased propensity for a delayed sleep phase and eveningness preference reported in adolescents and extended recovery sleep. However, this change in sleep timing also indicates that our cohort may be experiencing weekend phase delay or social jet lag that is common in adolescents and contributes to circadian misalignment and may impact subsequent mood and cognitive function^{28, 41, 42}.

S_i in our study was measured by OGTT. Among our normal glycemic adolescent cohort, participants who obtained <6.6 hours of sleep per night had significantly greater insulin

AUC, indicating IR. This is concerning as IR is a risk factor for T2D and progression to diabetes occurs more rapidly in teens than in adults^{2, 43}. Future work to explore the physiological mechanisms involved in the relationship between sleep and circadian health and insulin response is urgently needed and may inform novel prevention and intervention strategies for IR and T2D for adolescents.

Strengths of our study include circadian phase assessment using full-night salivary melatonin sampling in dim light conditions, objective measurement of sleep for multiple nights in the home environment (actigraphy), and use of an OGTT which builds upon previous research that focused only on sleep but not circadian health and relied primarily on fasting measures of S_i. Additionally, the study design minimized confounders by controlling for the effects of both chronic and acute exercise, pubertal and weight status, menstrual cycle, and day of study visit on S_i. However, the study was limited by several factors including relatively small sample size and cross-sectional study design. Additional study in a larger and more diverse sample is needed. Moreover, although the CIRC study excluded participants with a diagnosis of OSA and screened for sleep disorder symptoms, future study using polysomnography to objectively assess for sleep-disordered breathing and to examine sleep staging is recommended.

Suggestions for future research include use of more rigorous stimulated measures of S_i or insulin secretion such as intravenous glucose tolerance test (IVGTT) or the gold-standard hyperinsulinemic-euglycemic clamp to verify and expand upon these findings. Experimental designs to manipulate sleep and circadian rhythms may help elucidate causal mechanisms underlying the relationship between sleep and circadian timing with S_i in adolescents.

In conclusion, we found that short and late sleep and later circadian timing of sleep were associated with reduced S_i in a cohort of adolescents with overweight/obesity during the school year. Clinicians should consider assessment and treatment of sleep and circadian health, including sleep duration, time in bed, and sleep timing, when working with adolescents with overweight/obesity. Further research is needed to better understand the physiology behind these observations, as well as to evaluate sleep and circadian interventions or delayed school day start times as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics⁴⁴ as a possible means for improving metabolic health for this population.

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List of Abbreviations:

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| AUC | area under the curve |
| DLMO_n | dim light melatonin onset |
| DLMO_{off} | dim light melatonin offset |
| HOMA-IR | homeostatic model assessment |
| IR | insulin resistance |
| OGTT | oral glucose tolerance test |
| T2D | type 2 diabetes |
| WASO | wake after sleep onset |

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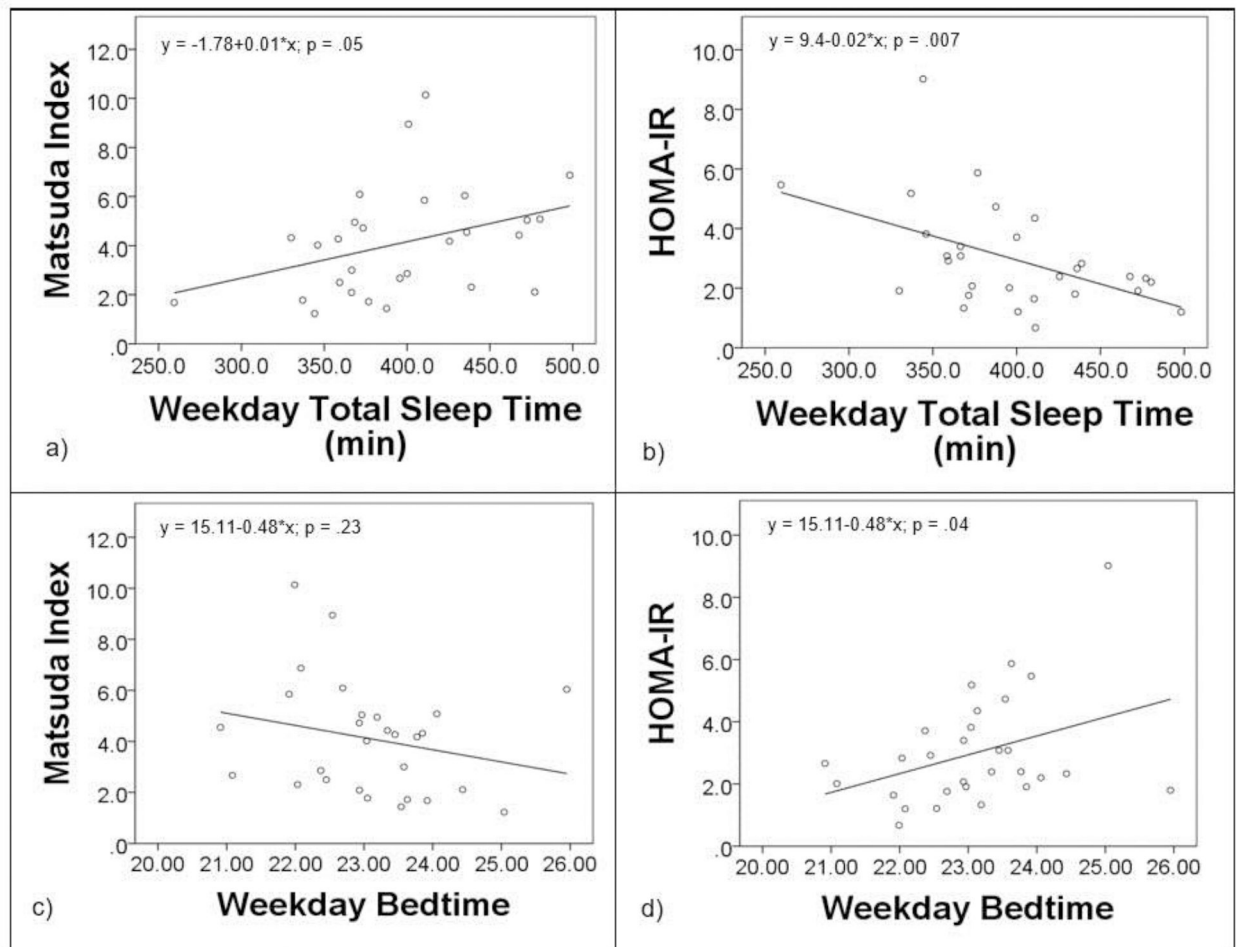


Figure 1.

Regression analyses between weekday total sleep time and a) Matsuda Index and b) HOMA-IR, and weekday bedtime and c) Matsuda Index and d) HOMA-IR. Greater weekday sleep duration and earlier bedtimes were significantly associated with better insulin sensitivity.

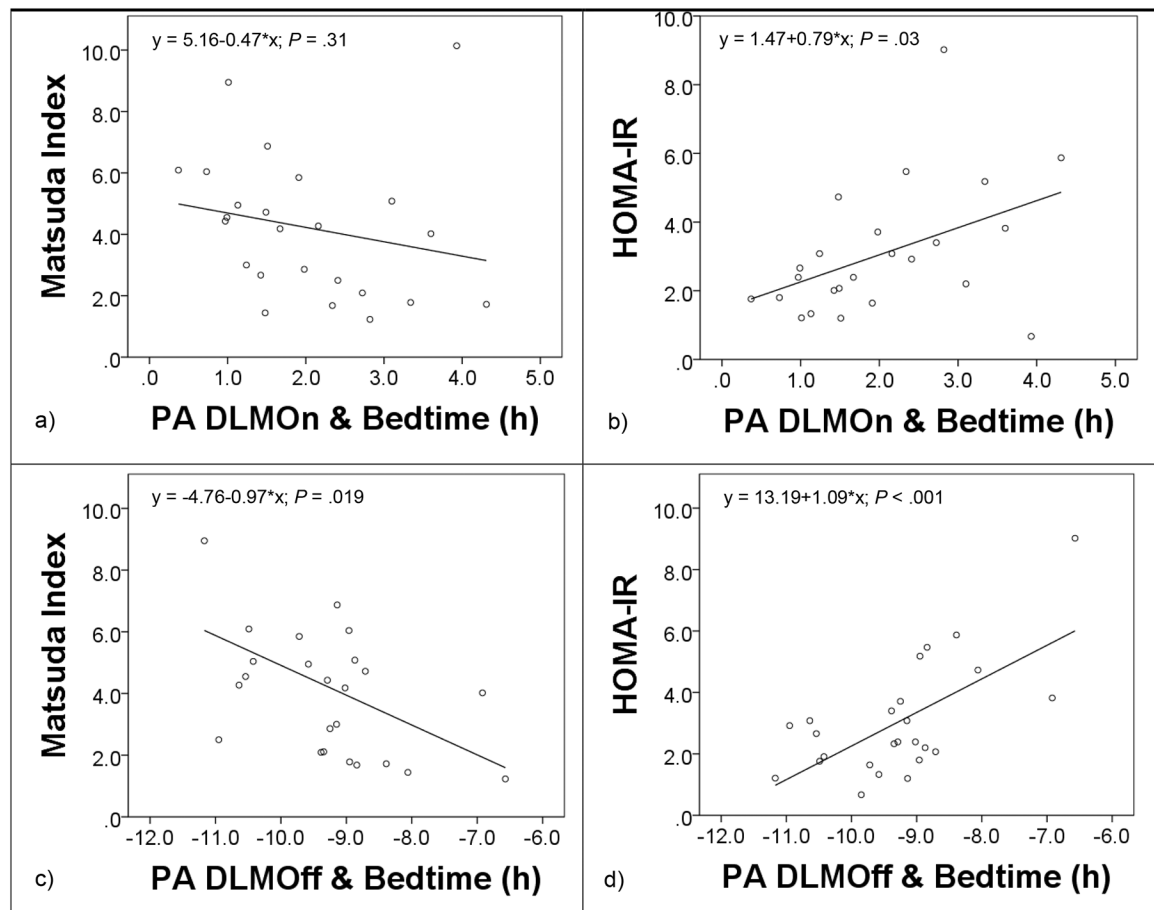


Figure 2.

Regression analyses between the phase angle (PA) for dim light melatonin onset (DLMO_{On}) and bedtime and a) Matsuda Index and b) HOMA-IR, and PA for dim light melatonin offset (DLMO_{Off}) and bedtime and c) Matsuda Index and d) HOMA-IR. Shorter phase angles between weekday bedtime and DLMO_{On}, indicating sleep onset at an earlier circadian time, were significantly associated with better S_i . Greater phase angles between weekday bedtime and DLMO_{Off}, reflecting longer sleep duration during the biological night, were significantly associated with better S_i .

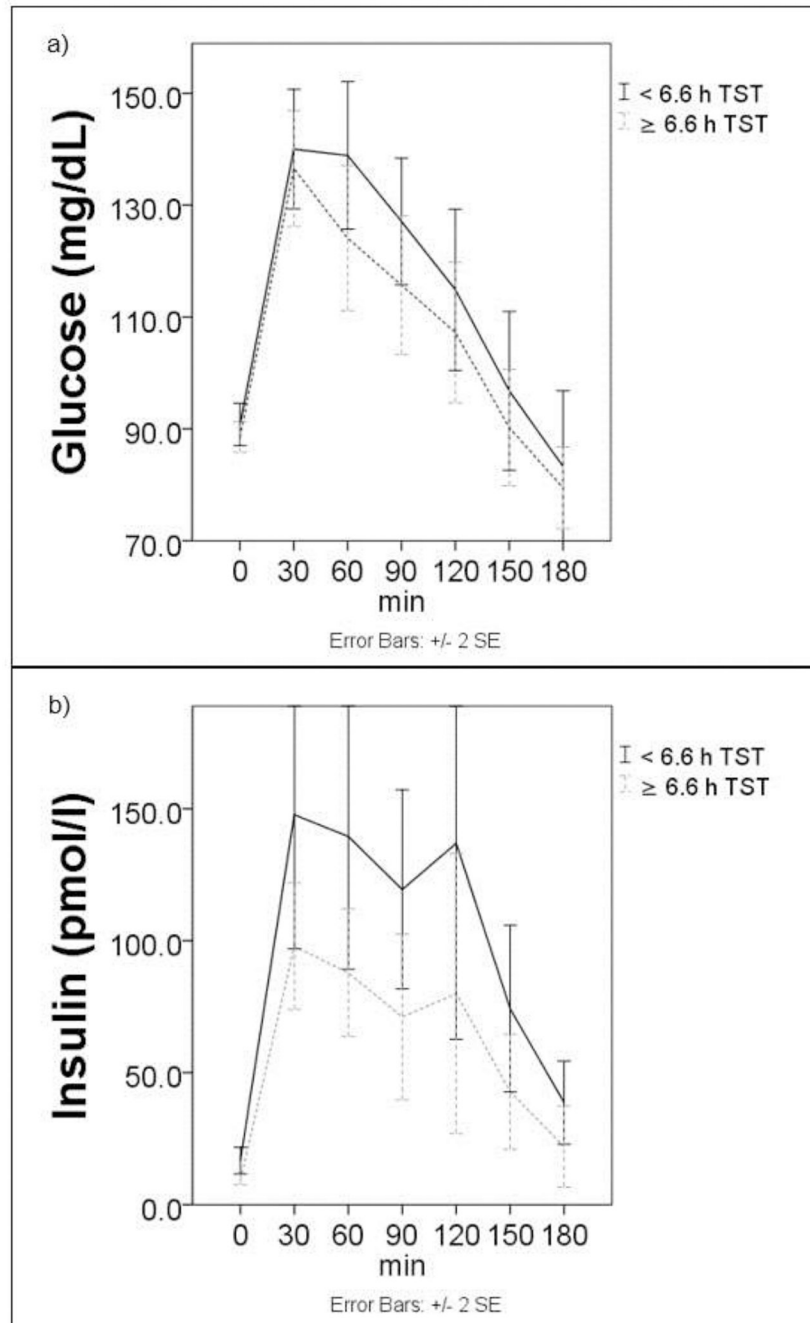


Figure 3.

Area under the curve for a) glucose and b) insulin concentrations. Participants with sleep duration less than the median of 6.6h per night had significantly greater area under the curve (AUC) for insulin ($p = 0.03$), but not glucose ($p = 0.2$), compared to those with ≥ 6.6 h sleep per night.

Table 1.

Participant Characteristics, Mean (SD)

| <i>N = 31</i> | |
|----------------------------|------------|
| Age (years) | 16.0 (1.4) |
| Female Sex | 24 (77.4%) |
| BMI Percentile | 96.9 (2.4) |
| <i>Race N (%)</i> | |
| Hispanic | 18 (58.1) |
| African American | 8 (25.8) |
| Caucasian | 5 (16.1) |
| <i>Tanner Stage N (%)</i> | |
| 4 | 9 (29) |
| 5 | 22 (71) |
| <i>Insulin Sensitivity</i> | |
| HbA _{1c} | 5.4 (0.3) |
| Matsuda Index | 4.1 (2.2) |
| HOMA (mg/dl) | 3.0 (1.8) |

Table 2.**Actigraphy & Melatonin Variables, Mean (SD)**

| <i>Actigraphy (N = 31)</i> | <i>Weekday</i> | <i>Weekend</i> | <i>p</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Total Sleep Time (min) | 396.4 (52.6) | 450.3 (57.4) | <.001 |
| Time in Bed (min) | 471.17 (57.5) | 545.46 (85.4) | <.001 |
| Onset Latency (min) | 17.3 (18.8) | 15.9 (17.9) | .75 |
| Sleep Efficiency (%) | 84.5 (5.7) | 83.1 (6.4) | .16 |
| WASO (min) | 49.7 (23.6) | 70.1 (43.7) | <.001 |
| Bedtime <i>M (min, max)</i> | 23:03 (20:54, 01:57) | 24:01 (20:31, 03:11) | <.001 |
| Waketime <i>M (min, max)</i> | 06:52 (05:31, 09:53) | 09:06 (05:49, 12:14) | <.001 |
| Midpoint Time <i>M (min, max)</i> | 03:17 (01:37, 06:16) | 05:04 (01:47, 08:53) | <.001 |
| <i>Melatonin (N = 27)</i> | <i>Weekday</i> | | |
| DLMO _{on} (time) | 21:00 (1.5 h) | | |
| DLMO _{off} (time) | 08:24 (1.0 h) | | |
| Bedtime PA DLMO _{on} (h) | 2.0 (1.0) | | |
| Bedtime PA DLMO _{off} (h) | -9.3 (1.1) | | |
| Waketime PA DLMO _{on} (h) | 9.7 (1.1) | | |
| Waketime PA DLMO _{off} (h) | -1.6 (1.1) | | |
| Duration melatonin secretion (h) | 11.3 (1.2) | | |

P-value represents significant differences between weekday and weekend variables as assessed with paired samples t-tests

WASO, wake after sleep onset; DLMO_{on}, dim light melatonin onset; DLMO_{off}, dim light melatonin offset; PA, phase angle