Next weekend’s time change will allow many of us a well-deserved extra hour of sleep. But extra sleep, for many of us, is really needed every night, says a College of Charleston professor who is a nationally recognized sleep expert.

Psychology professor Diana Gant debunks what many people believe is the optimal snooze average of seven or eight hours a night.

“Most people need nine-to-10 hours a night to perform optimally,” she says. “Some should be taken in afternoon naps. I know not everyone agrees with me, but that’s what I keep finding.”

Gant says people who think going without sleep “is the big, sophisticated, macho thing to do” are, figuratively, asleep at the wheel.

“They figure they don’t need it, that the rules don’t apply to them, that they can get more done,” Gant says. “It may work for them for a while, but sooner or later they begin to suffer the consequences.”

And consequences there have been. Gant claims “the element of sleeplessness” contributed to major disasters such as America’s space shuttle

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Challenger explosion, Russia’s Chernobyl nuclear reactor meltdown, and Alaska’s Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill.

“Going without enough sleep is as much of a public and personal safety hazard as going to work drunk,” Gant says.

“It can make people clumsy, stupid, unhappy.”

Gant has spent some two decades studying sleep. Her studies have convinced her that most people suffer from sleep deprivation.

“When I started, I wanted to write about people who got little sleep and remained productive,” she says. “The problem was, when my subjects arrived in laboratories and got a chance to sleep in dark, quiet rooms, they all slept for about nine hours.”

To improve your sleep, Gant recommends the following:

- Keep your room dark and quiet, draw the shades and turn off all lights
- Relax for an hour before going to bed—watch TV or read for a while
- Don’t drink, especially alcohol or caffeine, before going to bed
- Also avoid eating sweets and other sugary foods
- Get a comfortable bed and keep your bed linens clean and fresh

So enjoy your extra hour of sleep next weekend during the “fall back” time change, and don’t sleep on it—catch more “Zs” year round.

And next spring when we lose an hour’s sleep, Gant warns to be careful on the roads because she has found that drowsy drivers cause an 8 percent increase in car accidents the day after that time change.

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