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The Role of Sleep in Insulin Sensitivity and Type 2 Diabetes Risk

Daria Twardowska
Medical University of Silesia
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice
Email: daria.twardowska@interia.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5807-4915

Wiktoria Śliwa
Medical University of Silesia
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice
Email: wiki00727@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2406-853X

Wiktoria Tłoczek
Medical University of Silesia
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice
Email: wiktoriatloczek10@interia.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7722-5037

Wiktoria Szlachta
Medical University of Silesia
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice
Email: wiktoria.szlachtaa@interia.eu
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3739-4211

Dominik Kret
Medical University of Silesia
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice
Email: kdominik2000@o2.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6218-027X

Antoni Anczyk
Medical University of Silesia in Katowice
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice
Email: naron333@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3817-3675

Karolina Handzel
Medical University of Silesia in Katowice
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055, Katowice, Poland
Email: karolinahandzel30@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5765-0458

Abstract
Sleep disturbances are increasingly recognized as important and modifiable determinants of insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes (T2D). This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of experimental, physiological, and epidemiological evidence published between 2015 and 2026 examining the relationship between sleep and insulin sensitivity. We summarize the roles of sleep duration, sleep quality, sleep architecture, and circadian alignment in the regulation of glucose metabolism, pancreatic β-cell function, and neuroendocrine pathways. Experimental studies demonstrate that short-term sleep restriction rapidly reduces whole-body insulin sensitivity and impairs β-cell responsiveness, even in the absence of weight gain. Large prospective cohorts and meta-analyses consistently link chronic short sleep, sleep fragmentation, irregular sleep timing, and circadian misalignment- including shift work- to an increased risk of incident T2D. Among individuals with established T2D, poor sleep quality, insomnia, and sleep-disordered breathing are highly prevalent and are associated with worse glycemic control and greater cardiometabolic risk. We further review evidence for sleep-focused interventions, including sleep extension, cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia, treatment of obstructive sleep apnea, and circadian alignment strategies, which show modest but clinically meaningful improvements in insulin sensitivity and glycemic outcomes. Collectively, the evidence supports sleep optimization as an integral component of T2D prevention and management, complementing traditional lifestyle and pharmacological approaches.

Keywords: insulin sensitivity; insulin resistance; type 2 diabetes; short sleep duration; sleep quality; sleep-disordered breathing

1. Introduction

Type 2 diabetes (T2D) is a chronic metabolic disorder driven by progressive insulin resistance and β-cell dysfunction, with major downstream cardiovascular, renal, and neurological complications. Its incidence continues to rise globally, and- despite genetic susceptibility- disease onset and trajectory are strongly shaped by modifiable exposures and behaviors [1,2,3]. In this context, sleep has gained recognition as an active biological process that supports metabolic homeostasis, influences insulin sensitivity and β-cell function, modulates neuroendocrine stress pathways, and synchronizes peripheral metabolism with the circadian system [4,5,6].

Contemporary sleep patterns have shifted markedly. Artificial light exposure, evening screen use, shift work, extended work hours, and social jetlag promote curtailed sleep, irregular sleep timing, and circadian misalignment [2,7]. Population studies suggest that 20-30% of adults report habitual sleep below 6-7 hours per night, while adolescents and shift workers exhibit particularly irregular schedules [5, 8, 9]. Across experimental and observational literatures, insufficient sleep duration and poor sleep quality are associated with impaired glucose tolerance, higher insulin resistance indices, and elevated T2D risk; longer sleep duration is also linked to risk, likely reflecting comorbidity and residual confounding [3,5]. Given the expansion of evidence since 2015, this review synthesizes physiological, experimental, and epidemiological data on sleep-glucose interactions and evaluates sleep-focused interventions as adjuncts for prevention and management [5,10,11].

2. Sleep and Glucose Metabolism Regulation- Physiological Basis

2.1 Sleep architecture and endocrine regulation

Human sleep alternates between non-rapid eye movement (NREM) and rapid eye movement (REM) stages, cycling approximately every 90-110 minutes. Deep NREM stage N3 (slow-wave sleep, SWS) is associated with reduced sympathetic tone, predominance of parasympathetic activity, pulsatile growth hormone secretion, and low nocturnal cortisol concentrations [4,6]. This milieu supports anabolic processes, tissue repair, and insulin-responsive substrate handling. REM sleep, in contrast, is characterized by greater autonomic variability and increased cerebral glucose use.

Crucially, metabolic outcomes are influenced not only by total sleep time but also by sleep continuity and stage composition. Experimental suppression of SWS- without shortening total sleep, reduces insulin sensitivity and worsens glucose tolerance, supporting a specific role for sleep architecture in metabolic control [6].

2.2 Peripheral insulin sensitivity, skeletal muscle, and lipid flux

Insulin sensitivity reflects insulin-mediated glucose disposal (primarily in skeletal muscle) and suppression of hepatic glucose output. Skeletal muscle contributes roughly 70-80% of postprandial glucose uptake, making it the principal determinant of whole-body insulin sensitivity. Physiological sleep supports canonical insulin signaling (IRS-1/PI3K/Akt) and GLUT4 translocation in myocytes. Sleep restriction impairs these signaling pathways and reduces glucose uptake in controlled experiments [12,17].

Sleep loss also perturbs lipid metabolism. Acute sleep deprivation increases sympathetic activity and promotes adipose lipolysis, raising circulating free fatty acids (FFAs) [15]. Elevated FFAs interfere with insulin signaling via serine kinase activation and are associated with ectopic lipid deposition and mitochondrial stress, thereby amplifying insulin resistance [15].

2.3 Pancreatic β-cell function and compensation

β-cells maintain euglycemia by increasing insulin secretion in response to insulin resistance; failure of this compensation is central to T2D pathogenesis. Sleep curtailment reduces first-phase insulin secretion and β-cell glucose sensitivity [2,13,14]. In youth at elevated risk, experimentally reducing sleep lowers β-cell responsiveness and the disposition index, indicating diminished capacity to compensate for insulin resistance [5,13]. Recurrent exposure to insufficient or fragmented sleep may therefore accelerate the transition from insulin resistance to dysglycemia by increasing secretory demand while impairing β-cell function.

2.4 HPA axis and autonomic pathways

Sleep interacts bidirectionally with the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. Under normal conditions, cortisol declines at night and rises toward morning. Sleep deprivation and fragmentation blunt nocturnal cortisol suppression and increase evening and nocturnal cortisol concentrations, which enhance hepatic gluconeogenesis and antagonize insulin action in muscle and adipose tissue [6,12]. In parallel, sleep loss increases sympathetic tone and catecholamine release, further impairing insulin sensitivity and promoting lipolysis with consequent FFA elevations [15]. These neuroendocrine alterations provide a mechanistic bridge between sleep disturbance, stress physiology, and metabolic impairment.

2.5 Circadian regulation and metabolic timing

The circadian system, coordinated by the suprachiasmatic nucleus, entrains peripheral clocks in the liver, muscle, and adipose tissue. Clock gene networks (e.g., BMAL1, CLOCK, PER, CRY) regulate the temporal expression of enzymes and transporters involved in glucose and lipid metabolism [2,16]. Circadian misalignment- due to shift work, delayed sleep timing, or irregular schedules- desynchronizes behavioral cycles (sleep/feeding) from endogenous rhythms and impairs insulin secretion and glucose handling [2]. Clinical studies show that evening chronotype and irregular sleep timing are associated with higher fasting glucose and HbA1c, consistent with a role for circadian instability in dysglycemia [16].

3. Effect of short sleep on Insulin Sensitivity - Experimental studies

3.1 Sleep restriction in healthy adults

Controlled laboratory studies provide strong causal evidence that reducing sleep to ~4-5 hours per night for 4-7 nights decreases whole-body insulin sensitivity in healthy adults [17,18]. In young adults, moderate sleep restriction produced approximately 20-25% reductions in insulin sensitivity- effects comparable in magnitude to early metabolic impairment- without requiring weight gain or sustained caloric excess [18]. Similar associations are observed in clamp-based studies linking shorter habitual sleep to reduced insulin sensitivity [17]. In postmenopausal women, experimentally restricted sleep impaired insulin sensitivity and shifted substrate utilization toward greater lipid oxidation, consistent with altered metabolic flexibility [19].

Meta-analyses across trials confirm that sleep restriction increases fasting insulin, worsens HOMA-IR, and modestly elevates fasting glucose [10,20]. The rapid onset of these changes- often within days- highlights the sensitivity of glucose regulation to acute sleep loss and

suggests that repetitive short-sleep exposure could accumulate metabolic consequences over time [10,20].

3.2 Vulnerable subgroups: women and adolescents

Sex-specific vulnerability has been reported, with chronic insufficient sleep in women associated with impaired insulin sensitivity independent of adiposity change [14]. Hormonal transitions (perimenopause/menopause) may further increase susceptibility, potentially via reduced estrogen-mediated metabolic protection [19]. Adolescence is another high-risk period because puberty is accompanied by physiological insulin resistance. Sleep restriction superimposed on this background may exacerbate dysglycemia risk; experimental and longitudinal pediatric evidence links short sleep with impaired insulin sensitivity and later metabolic syndrome features [5,9,13].

3.3 Mechanistic integration

Across experimental paradigms, sleep restriction converges on a shared mechanistic profile: impaired muscle insulin signaling [12,17], HPA axis activation with higher cortisol [6,12], sympathetic activation with FFA elevations [15], reduced β-cell responsiveness [13,14], and circadian disruption that degrades temporal metabolic regulation [2,16]. These pathways interact synergistically, yielding clinically meaningful insulin resistance that may be reversible with sleep recovery, yet potentially persistent when exposure is chronic.

4. Sleep and the Risk of Developing Type 2 Diabetes- Epidemiological Evidence

4.1 Sleep duration and incident T2D

Prospective cohort studies across diverse settings consistently associate short sleep (<6-7 hours) with increased incident T2D [22,23,24]. Many analyses also demonstrate a U-shaped relationship, with both short and long sleep correlating with higher risk [3,5,24]. While short sleep plausibly contributes causally via the mechanisms described above, long sleep likely captures heterogeneity, including comorbidities, low physical activity, depression, and inflammatory burden [5].

A multidimensional meta-analysis incorporating sleep duration, continuity, and timing found that short sleep confers an approximately 20-40% higher T2D risk after adjustment for conventional covariates [5]. Importantly, the relationship often persists after accounting for BMI, suggesting effects that are not fully mediated by obesity [1,3]. Longitudinal analyses further indicate that sustained or worsening sleep deprivation over time is more strongly associated with incident T2D than transient sleep loss, consistent with cumulative biological stress [22].

4.2 Sleep continuity, insomnia symptoms, and variability

Sleep fragmentation and low sleep efficiency are independently associated with impaired glucose metabolism [6,25]. In older adults, objective sleep disruption correlates with worse glucose tolerance even when total sleep duration is similar [25]. Mechanistically, recurrent arousals increase sympathetic activity and nocturnal cortisol, promoting hepatic glucose production and peripheral insulin resistance [6].

Recent work emphasizes that sleep regularity and timing variability are clinically relevant. Night-to-night variability in sleep onset and wake time is associated with higher fasting glucose and HbA1c, suggesting that circadian instability may compromise glycemic control even when mean sleep duration appears adequate [5]. These findings support the view that "how" one sleeps (continuity and regularity) is metabolically consequential alongside "how long" one sleeps.

4.3 Early-life sleep and later metabolic risk

Childhood sleep duration and timing may shape lifelong metabolic risk. Pediatric studies associate short sleep with increased adiposity, insulin resistance, and later-life T2D susceptibility [9]. During adolescence, delayed sleep phase and chronic sleep restriction are common; persistent short or irregular sleep predicts higher BMI and metabolic syndrome features in early adulthood, reinforcing the need for early prevention strategies [5,9].

4.4 Shift work and circadian misalignment

Shift work is a paradigmatic model of chronic circadian disruption and is consistently linked to higher T2D incidence [2]. Circadian misalignment reflects a mismatch between endogenous rhythmicity and behavioral cycles (sleep/feeding). Experimental misalignment protocols demonstrate impaired insulin sensitivity and β-cell function even when sleep duration is controlled, indicating a direct effect of timing disruption [2]. In real-world shift workers, circadian misalignment often co-occurs with reduced sleep duration and adverse eating patterns, compounding metabolic risk [2,16].

5. Sleep Disturbances and Glycemic Control in Established T2D

Sleep problems are common among individuals with T2D and may worsen glycemic control through bidirectional mechanisms. Reduced sleep efficiency, prolonged sleep latency, and frequent awakenings are associated with higher HbA1c and greater glycemic variability, independent of BMI in several analyses [26,27]. Conversely, hyperglycemia can disrupt sleep via nocturia, neuropathic pain, and restless legs symptoms, creating a reinforcing cycle.

Both short sleep and poor sleep quality in T2D are associated with adverse metabolic phenotypes, including visceral adiposity, dyslipidemia, and inflammatory activation [21]. Long sleep may also correlate with worse outcomes, potentially reflecting comorbidity and reduced physical activity [21]. These associations support routine clinical assessment of sleep as part of comprehensive diabetes management.

5.1 Sleep-disordered breathing and intermittent hypoxia

Sleep-disordered breathing (SDB), particularly obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), is prevalent in patients with obesity and T2D. Intermittent hypoxia and sleep fragmentation activate oxidative stress pathways and inflammatory cascades, impair insulin signaling, and increase hepatic glucose output [15,28]. SDB also increases sympathetic activity and lipolysis, elevating circulating FFAs that further reduce insulin sensitivity and promote ectopic fat accumulation [15].

Population data show that SDB severity correlates with impaired glucose metabolism and higher T2D prevalence [28]. Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) treatment yields modest improvements in insulin sensitivity and HbA1c in many trials, though effect sizes vary and depend heavily on adherence [10,26]. Given its cardiometabolic implications, identifying and treating SDB is clinically relevant in T2D care pathways.

5.2 Insomnia and hyperarousal in T2D

Insomnia is characterized by hyperarousal with increased sympathetic activity and dysregulated HPA axis function, mechanisms that plausibly worsen insulin resistance [6]. Insomnia symptoms are associated with higher fasting glucose and impaired insulin sensitivity even after accounting for sleep duration, highlighting the importance of sleep quality and arousal physiology [27].

6. Pathophysiological Mechanisms Linking Sleep Disturbance to Insulin Resistance

Sleep disturbances converge on several interrelated mechanisms that promote insulin resistance and β-cell stress:

Neuroendocrine activation: Increased nocturnal cortisol and sympathetic tone elevate hepatic glucose output and impair peripheral glucose uptake [6,12].

Lipid dysregulation: Enhanced lipolysis raises FFAs, which disrupt insulin signaling and promote ectopic lipid deposition [15].

Inflammation and oxidative stress: Sleep loss, insomnia, and intermittent hypoxia elevate inflammatory mediators (e.g., IL-6, TNF-α) and oxidative stress, inhibiting insulin signaling cascades [6,15].

Appetite and behavior: Reduced leptin and increased ghrelin promote appetite and may shift food choice toward energy-dense patterns; extended wake time increases opportunities for late eating that can misalign feeding with circadian rhythms [2,7].

Circadian desynchronization: Disrupted clock gene expression and misalignment between central and peripheral oscillators impair temporal coordination of insulin secretion, glucose transport, and hepatic glucose production [2,16].

These pathways help explain why sleep interventions may produce metabolic benefits even when body weight changes are modest. Additional mechanistic considerations: adipokines, hepatic insulin resistance, and sleep stage effects. Beyond cortisol and sympathetic activation, sleep loss alters adipokine signaling and hepatic substrate handling. Sleep restriction has been associated with reductions in leptin and increases in ghrelin, which may promote positive energy balance and preferential intake of carbohydrate- and fat-rich foods [2,7]. While appetite-mediated weight gain is not required for acute insulin resistance, over longer time horizons these hormonal shifts plausibly amplify adiposity, ectopic fat accumulation, and hepatic insulin resistance. The liver is particularly sensitive to neuroendocrine perturbations; elevated cortisol and catecholamines increase gluconeogenesis and glycogenolysis, thereby raising fasting glucose. Sleep fragmentation may further impair hepatic insulin sensitivity through recurrent arousals that increase sympathetic bursts and disrupt nocturnal glucose production patterns [6]. Finally, stage-specific effects may matter: reductions in SWS and increased light sleep can weaken nocturnal autonomic quiescence, whereas altered REM patterns may influence counter-regulatory hormones and glucose variability in susceptible individuals [6].

7. Sleep-Related Interventions for Prevention and Therapy

7.1 Sleep extension

Sleep extension is most relevant for habitual short sleepers. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that increasing sleep by ~60-120 minutes per night can reduce fasting glucose and improve HOMA-IR (10). Trials in adolescents at metabolic risk show improvements in insulin sensitivity and β-cell function when sleep is extended [13]. In adults with short sleep and dysglycemia, sleep extension can reduce postprandial glucose excursions and improve insulin sensitivity indices, supporting its potential as an adjunct intervention [11]. Biological plausibility includes normalization of cortisol rhythms, reductions in sympathetic drive and FFAs, and improved circadian stability.

7.2 Improving sleep quality and treating insomnia

Interventions that improve sleep continuity- particularly CBT-I and structured sleep hygiene- may attenuate hyperarousal and neuroendocrine stress responses [6,10]. While large metabolic RCTs remain limited, systematic reviews indicate that sleep-focused behavioral

interventions can improve glycemic markers in some populations, especially when insomnia or fragmentation is prominent [10]. Minimizing nocturnal light exposure and stabilizing bed/wake times may further support circadian alignment [2,11].

7.3 Treating sleep-disordered breathing

In patients with OSA, CPAP reduces intermittent hypoxia, sympathetic activation, and oxidative stress [15,28]. Trials report modest improvements in insulin sensitivity and HbA1c [10,26]. Given additional benefits on blood pressure and cardiovascular risk, CPAP should be considered in appropriate patients, with emphasis on adherence and integrated weight management.

7.4 Circadian alignment and sleep timing

Circadian timing interventions aim to reduce social jetlag, regularize schedules, and, when appropriate, advance delayed sleep timing. Randomized studies adjusting sleep timing in individuals with late chronotype or prediabetes show improvements in fasting glucose, HOMA-IR, and β-cell responsiveness [11]. Adjunct strategies include timed morning light exposure, reduction of evening light, and aligning meal timing with daytime biological rhythms to support peripheral clock synchronization [2,11].

7.5 Integration into comprehensive diabetes care

Sleep optimization is best conceptualized as a complementary pillar within diabetes prevention and management programs. Combining sleep interventions with dietary quality, physical activity, and weight management may yield additive benefits and improve adherence by addressing fatigue and self-regulation capacity. In clinical practice, structured sleep assessment (duration, continuity, timing, SDB symptoms, insomnia) can identify actionable targets and inform referrals to sleep medicine or behavioral therapy when indicated [10,26].

7.6 Practical implementation in clinical and public health settings

Operationalizing sleep optimization requires feasible screening and targeted interventions. In primary care and diabetes clinics, brief screening can capture: (i) habitual sleep duration and regularity (weekday-weekend discrepancy), (ii) insomnia symptoms and sleep efficiency, and (iii) SDB risk (snoring, witnessed apneas, excessive daytime sleepiness). Patients with high SDB probability may benefit from diagnostic testing and CPAP initiation, whereas insomnia-predominant profiles are appropriate for CBT-I referral [10,26]. For short sleepers, structured sleep extension programs typically combine education, stimulus control, and goal-based scheduling; adherence may be enhanced by addressing barriers such as shift work, caregiving, and evening technology use [10,11]. Public health strategies may include school-based interventions that promote earlier bedtimes, limit evening screen exposure, and encourage consistent wake times- particularly relevant for adolescents who experience chronic sleep restriction [5,9]. In occupational settings, circadian-informed scheduling (forward-rotating shifts, adequate recovery time, and strategic light exposure) may mitigate metabolic risk among shift workers [2].

8. Limitations of Current Evidence

Several limitations temper interpretation and translation:

Measurement heterogeneity: Studies use self-report, actigraphy, and polysomnography with differing validity for duration, timing, and architecture [4,5,8].

Short intervention horizons: Most experimental studies span days to weeks, limiting inference on long-term T2D incidence and sustained β-cell preservation [10,18,19].

Residual confounding and reverse causality: Observational associations may reflect comorbidity, depression, or subclinical disease that both alters sleep and increases T2D risk [5].
Population heterogeneity: Age, sex, adiposity, chronotype, and comorbidities modify effects, highlighting the need for stratified analyses and individualized recommendations [14,21].

Toward clinically meaningful endpoints
A persistent challenge is translating intermediate metabolic effects into hard outcomes. Many studies report changes in HOMA-IR, fasting glucose, or HbA1c; fewer quantify insulin sensitivity with clamps or assess β-cell function longitudinally. Future trials should incorporate standardized outcomes (e.g., disposition index, continuous glucose monitoring metrics, and incident T2D) and evaluate durability after intervention cessation. Pragmatic designs embedded in healthcare systems may improve generalizability, while stratification by chronotype, sex, and baseline sleep disturbance could identify responders and refine precision recommendations [5,11,13].

9. Future Directions

Research priorities include long-term RCTs of sleep extension and circadian alignment on incident T2D and β-cell outcomes [11,13]; mechanistic studies integrating inflammatory, autonomic, and peripheral clock pathways [6,15]; precision approaches incorporating chronotype and metabolic phenotype [2,5]; and use of wearables to capture multidimensional sleep alongside continuous glucose monitoring.

10. Conclusions

Sleep duration, quality, and circadian alignment are biologically plausible and epidemiologically supported determinants of insulin sensitivity and T2D risk. Experimental sleep restriction rapidly reduces insulin sensitivity and β-cell responsiveness [17,18,19], while cohort and meta-analytic data link chronic short sleep, sleep fragmentation, and irregular timing to higher incident T2D [5,22,23,24]. In established T2D, poor sleep quality and sleep-disordered breathing contribute to worse glycemic control and cardiometabolic risk [26,28]. Sleep-focused interventions- sleep extension, insomnia therapy, CPAP for OSA, and circadian alignment- show promising, generally modest but clinically relevant metabolic benefits, particularly when integrated into comprehensive lifestyle and medical care [10,11,13].

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Author's contribution:
Conceptualization: Daria Twardowska, Wiktoria Śliwa
Methodology: Wiktoria Śliwa, Dominik Kret, Wiktoria Tłoczek, Antoni Anczyk, Karolina Handzel
Software: Daria Twardowska, Wiktoria Tłoczek, Wiktoria Szlachta, Karolina Handzel
Check: Daria Twardowska, Dominik Kret, Wiktoria Szlachta
Formal Analysis: Dominik Kret, Wiktoria Szlachta, Wiktoria Tłoczek, Antoni Anczyk
Investigation: Wiktoria Śliwa, Dominik Kret, Daria Twardowska, Antoni Anczyk
Resources: Dominik Kret, Wiktoria Szlachta, Antoni Anczyk, Wiktoria Śliwa, Daria Twardowska, Karolina Handzel
Data Curation: Daria Twardowska, Wiktoria Tłoczek, Wiktoria Śliwa, Karolina Handzel
Writing - Review and Editing: Wiktoria Śliwa, Daria Twardowska
Visualization: Daria Twardowska, Wiktoria Tłoczek, Wiktoria Śliwa, Wiktoria Szlachta

Supervision: Dominik Kret, Wiktoria Szlachta, Wiktoria Tłoczek, Antoni Anczyk, Karolina Handzel
Project Administration: Daria Twardowska, Wiktoria Śliwa

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