

Sleep Disorders

Without question adequate sleep is an absolute necessity for good health. While we can withstand occasional sleepless nights, the consequences of inadequate sleep are far reaching.

Normal night-time sleep occurs in defined cycles, each lasting 90 to 120 minutes and repeated approximately four to five times per night. Sleep is divided into two distinct types: REM (rapid eye movement) and non-REM sleep. During REM sleep, dreaming takes place and the brain is very active. Non-REM sleep is divided into 4 stages and as sleep progresses brain wave activity slows.

Most adults experience insomnia or sleeplessness at some time in their lives. In fact, it is estimated that 30 to 50% of the general population is affected by insomnia and 10% suffer with chronic insomnia. Although sleep disturbances are often thought to be a nocturnal problem, it is during the day that it has the most impact, with effects such as:

- Increased risk of mood disorders
- Fatigue
- Poor concentration
- Poor memory
- Irritability

We all know how healing and restorative a good night's sleep can be – even the most stressful problems can seem easier to cope with in the morning. Yet stress is often the very trigger that can steal away the night. Although there are various reasons for sleep disturbances, stress is the most common trigger for acute insomnia. If left unchecked, this may develop into chronic insomnia, where sleep architecture is repetitively disrupted.

The Research on Sleep Disturbances

An individual's response to stressful life events, rather than the frequency of stressful occurrences has been shown to be the predominant factor linking insomnia with stress. Insomniacs appear to have a heightened level of stress at the time of onset of insomnia in comparison to healthy controls.¹

Sleep researchers have found an increased vulnerability to sleeping problems in middle aged men who are stressed. They found that increased corticotrophin releasing hormone (CRH) levels are associated with staying awake longer and sleeping less deeply. The study concluded that increased insomnia with ageing might be directly related to chronic stress, as there is increased sensitivity to arousal stress hormones such as CRH and cortisol.²

Oversleeping is associated with atypical depression, along with overeating and fatigue.³



Getting too much or too little sleep could be a risk factor for diabetes. An American study of 1,100 men over 24 years found that those who had less than five hours or more than eight hours of sleep nightly fell into a higher risk profile for diabetes than those who reported seven hours of sleep per night.⁴

Tips for Improving Your Sleep

- have a sleep routine - try to get to bed and wake up around the same time each day
- have a good bedroom environment – temperature, lighting and bedding are very important to comfort, which is integral to getting a good nights sleep
- use your bed solely for sleep and sex – cut out using your bed for any activities other than these
- avoid frustration – if you find yourself tossing and turning and unable to sleep, get up and sit in another room and do something. Lying there listening to the clock ticking will only make you frustrated and annoyed
- deal with your worries – if you are prone to worrying, put aside a special time to worry such as writing a list an hour before bedtime
- eat and drink well – don't go to bed on a full stomach and avoid food and drink that will upset your stomach. If the midnight pee is the root of your problems, drink as much as you can during the day and stop at 6pm. Spicy foods close to bedtime may also keep you awake
- exercise – exercise is an excellent aide to inducing sleep but don't get active too close to bedtime as the endorphin rush will keep you stimulated and unable to sleep. Exercise in the morning as this results in a happier frame of mind
- avoid stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol and energy drinks

Natural Solutions

Many herbal medicines have been proven to assist with both sleep onset and sleep maintenance insomnia. Depending on what causative factors are involved in your sleep disturbances, specific herbs will be formulated for you. Magnesium is a muscle relaxant and when taken one hour before bed will enable you to fall asleep more easily. Vitamin B6 and the mineral zinc are co-enzymes in the production of hormones such as serotonin and melatonin, which help to regulate sleep. Chronically elevated stress leads to a dysfunction of cortisol production and this will affect sleeping patterns. Emma will assess the reasons behind your sleep disturbances and prescribes accordingly.

References

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