

## **Getting a Good Night's Sleep**

There are few lifestyle factors that have a more regular impact on our lives than the quality of our sleep. We all know how it feels to lose just an hour of sleep, not to mention even more. In fact, some studies have shown that both acute and chronic sleep deprivation (either nightly or consistent loss of only 1-2 hours of sleep) can mimic the effects of driving under the influence of alcohol on motor (physical) and cognitive (brain) skills. While every person's tolerance for both sleep deprivation and alcohol can be varied, this shows illustrates the effects of sleep loss in a dramatic way.

There are many causes of sleep difficulty, the most probable being stress for many of us. However, the causes of insomnia may be multiple for any one person; the key of course to obtaining good sleep is discerning the causative factor. Some common causes may include dietary (sugar, caffeine, alcohol\*), mental-emotional (depression & anxiety), hormone imbalance and even overweight.

\*Alcohol is actually disruptive to the sleep cycle. While it acts as a sedative and makes one drowsy, it limits the type of deep sleep that we need most.

## **Exercise and Insomnia**

Perhaps one of the best remedies for trouble falling and staying asleep is exercise. In fact, the most effective daytime behavior associated with improved sleep is exercise. Exercise is known to promote sleep on several points; sleep is thought of as a means to conserve energy and repair tissue. It is also a means for the body to lower its temperature, which is another energy conservation method. And, exercise provides the greatest stimulus for using stored energy, 'damaging' tissue and of course elevating body temperature. Therefore, the more we exercise, the body becomes more efficient at doing the things it needs (like sleeping) to recover from the 'side effects' of exercise. And as I like to repeat often, there is no cheaper, safer, and healthier medicine out there than exercise!

We have all heard that exercising too close to bedtime is typically not a good idea. This is partially true. More specifically, intense exercise (running, weight lifting) will tend to elevate your body and keep you awake longer. On the other hand, very mild exercise an hour before bed (a short stroll) may actually release some stress and allow one to fall asleep more quickly. Everyone is an individual; experimentation is the key here.

## **Lack of sleep and the exerciser**

Sleep is time for the body to reset its internal clock and perform repairs. Bodily cycles are governed by our hormones, which ebb and flow throughout the day and night. The majority of hormones that do restorative work are secreted in abundance at night. The trick is that these patterns work best when given the proper environment. In other words, if we are awake when we should be sleeping, our body is not able to get the work done it needs to. For active people, this is important. Exercise is great for the body, but the body also needs time to recover from it. Less time spent recovering may

lead to decreased ability to heal from injuries, as well as leaving one prone to getting injuries as the body is not optimally rested. It has been said that the majority of physical repair takes place around 10:00 pm to 2:00 am, and psychological repair occurs from 2:00 am to 6:00 am. While these are very rough guidelines, they provide a good reminder for when our sleep should happen.

## **Rx For Sleep**

In addition to regular exercise, there are several other means to improve sleep, other than sleeping medication. Sleeping medications are not meant for long-term use and do nothing to bring the body back into a normal sleep rhythm. Used in the short term, they can be effective for bringing sleep, but I don't recommend using them consistently. There are many natural sleep aids, each with varying effects, sometimes dependent on the person. The hormone melatonin is an effective sleep aid when used correctly. Herbs can be helpful at relieving minor insomnia or sleep disturbances. Certain mineral and amino acid combinations also work well at telling the brain it is time to sleep; all of these treatments are useful for directly treating insomnia. As I mentioned earlier however, there are typically several underlying causes of insomnia. Some of these include other hormone imbalances (sex and stress hormones-estrogen, progesterone, cortisol, etc), blood sugar imbalances, physical pain (tight muscles) and being overweight (which can affect breathing at night). Finding the cause of insomnia is the first step in obtaining better sleep. If sleep difficulty cannot be corrected in a few days, it makes sense to seek help from your medical provider.

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