

House Calls

Get a Good Night's Sleep

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

Sleep...our best friend, or worst enemy. Sleep tends to be one of those things you take for granted, until for some reason or another, you can't seem to get it. The lack of sleep can make us feel anything from a bit grumpy, to feeling like our world is completely falling apart. Most new parents have a taste of sleep deprivation for the first time in their lives and can understand the perils insomnia can cause. The good news for these parents however, is their lack of sleep is typically for a relatively short period of time. However if you suffer from insomnia on a more chronic basis, without an obvious cause, it can be more than a bit frustrating.

Insomnia can present itself as an inability to fall asleep, frequent interruptions of sleep during the night, or waking up in the early morning hours and not being able to fall back to sleep. Most adults require an average of seven to eight hours of sound sleep to feel rested and refreshed, although this number varies. If a person gets less sleep than their body requires, they can experience many difficulties throughout the day such as excessive sleepiness, fatigue, difficulty focusing, and irritability or depressive mood. Lack of sleep due to insomnia has been linked with accidents both on the road and on the job. Since sleep bolsters the immune system, insomnia can cause decreased overall immunity, thus an increased prevalence of illness. As many as one in four Americans suffer from either chronic insomnia, or intermittent difficulty sleeping. Often times, insomnia is situational, like the excitement of the holidays, or stress of finances or relationships. Typically, once the uncomfortable situation has been resolved, so will the insomnia. During those times, there are some sleep habits one should keep in mind to help get a better night's sleep.

The best habit you can get into is to keep regular hours. Try to go to bed at the same time, and wake up at the same time every day. Avoid evening stimulants such as caffeine, tobacco, or chocolate. Try a warm cup of milk prior to bedtime. The calcium in milk aids in relaxing your muscles, and will help keep hunger away in the middle of the night. Be careful not to eat a full meal too close to

bedtime though, since indigestion can also be a cause of insomnia. Avoid exercise at least three hours before bedtime. However, try to get at least thirty minutes of exercise every day if you tend to have difficulty falling asleep. If you have trouble sleeping, it is proven that watching television in bed makes it much more difficult to fall asleep. Try not to stress about not getting enough sleep. It tends to make matters worse. Know that you will eventually sleep. Avoid alcohol as a sleep aid. It may help you fall asleep faster, but it causes you to wake up throughout the night. One mistake people with insomnia make is taking naps during the day, since they are so tired from not sleeping the night before. Unfortunately, this can make your insomnia worse, and it will be that much harder to get back on track to a normal sleep schedule.

If your insomnia interferes with your daytime functioning for a month or longer, you should seek medical attention for evaluation of your situation. There are many medical causes of insomnia including arthritis, neurological issues, thyroid disorders, and hormone imbalances. Depending on your personal situation and outcome of your medical consultation, your medical provider may order you to spend the night in a sleep disorder center for evaluation. The sleep center can monitor a number of body functions during the night such as heartbeat, breathing, muscle and eye movements. The sleep center evaluation can be a helpful tool in identifying underlying causes of your insomnia.

If it is found that your insomnia is not caused by a medical condition, then your provider may reiterate healthy sleep habits and sleep behavioral modifications as previously mentioned. Some sleep studies have shown that these behavioral modifications can be as helpful as prescription sleeping medications. While you are practicing these steps to a better night's sleep, you and your medical provider may decide you might want to try prescription sleeping medications for a short period of time. There are many prescription sleeping pills available, however because of the possible adverse side effects, sleeping without the aid of these medications should be the long term goal.

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