

Sleep Problems

- Reasons for Sleep Disruptions
- Diagnosing Sleep Problems
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What Women Should Know about Sleep Problems

Most women are quick to dismiss sleep problems as a natural part of their hectic lifestyles. As many as 70 million Americans suffer from sleep problems. Women are twice as likely as men to experience problems falling and staying asleep. Current sleep research aims to explore the reasons for gender differences in sleep patterns.

Sleep is a basic human need, essential to our survival. Not getting enough can interfere with daily routines, alertness, memory and functioning. Ongoing sleep problems can strain relationships and may be a red flag for other serious medical conditions (e.g., obesity, hypertension, stroke, depression). Women who have difficulties sleeping should contact their health care providers.

Why Sleep Matters

Along with maintaining a healthful diet and exercise routine, getting plenty of restful sleep is critical for good health. Sleep reenergizes your mind and body and improves your mood. Research shows sleep loss accumulates over time causing sleep debt. This lack of sleep can result in daytime drowsiness, reduced reaction times and poor con-

centration. Chronic sleep problems have also been linked to workplace injuries, driving accidents (up to 20 percent) and poor performance at work or school. Sleep disorders can place women at greater risk for other problems, including depression, heart disease and obesity.

How Much Is Enough?

Studies suggest women need roughly eight hours of sleep per night. Yet, on average, women between 30 and 60 years of age get less than seven hours of sleep a night during the work week. And quality of sleep is just as important as total sleep time. There are five distinct stages of sleep, including rapid eye movement, or REM sleep, which is when dream activity typically occurs. If your sleep is disturbed or you feel drowsy, you may not be spending enough time in each stage of the sleep cycle.

Reasons for Sleep Disruptions

There are a number of factors that can disrupt a woman's sleep, including:

- Stress and anxiety of juggling work, family and household responsibilities
- Diet and activity levels
- Hormonal changes and related symptoms
- Sleep disorders and other chronic medical conditions
- Distracting sleep environment

Hormones and Sleep Patterns

Shifts in normal sleep patterns are evident during puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and menopause due to changes in hormonal balances and associated symptoms, such as tender breasts, cramps and headaches. Fluctuating levels of the hormones estrogen and progesterone can trigger changes in body temperature and mood, as well as general discomfort—all of which impact sleep.

Hormone-related sleep problems can become more common during menopause and perimenopause at which time hot flashes and night sweats may be experienced and can lead to difficulties sleeping. However, not all women have these symptoms.

As we age, our sleep patterns change. Older women tend to awaken more easily, sleep less and spend less time in the deep, restful stages of sleep. There is no evidence that older women need less sleep.

Common Sleep Disorders in Women

- **Insomnia:** The most common sleep problem, this is a generic term for difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep or sleep that is perceived as being non-restorative. As many as 40 percent of women over 40 experience insomnia.
- **Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA):** Characterized by snoring and gasping for breath during sleep, this disorder, in which airflow is temporarily disrupted, is more common after menopause. It affects one in four women over 65 years of age. The most significant risk factor for sleep apnea is being overweight or obese.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Professional

1. What are common signs of a sleep disorder?
2. Are there ways to treat sleep problems aside from sleeping pills?
3. I have more trouble sleeping during menstruation. Is this normal?
4. Does diet play a role? Are there any beverages or foods I should avoid?
5. What steps can I take to get more restful sleep?

- **Restless legs syndrome (RLS):** This syndrome, characterized by creeping, crawling sensations in the legs and an irresistible urge to move your legs, particularly at night and while at rest, is more common in women. Many patients with RLS experience involuntary leg movements during sleep, which is called periodic limb movement disorder. RLS affects as many as 12 million Americans.

Certain chronic illnesses and substances such as alcohol, caffeine and nicotine also can interfere with sleep.

Resources

American Academy of Sleep Medicine
708-492-0930
www.aasmnet.org

The major professional society for sleep medicine, it is involved in education, development of professional standards, accreditation of sleep centers and governmental affairs.

American Insomnia Association
708-492-0930
www.americaninsomniaassociation.org
Provides information and support resources to those suffering from insomnia.

National Sleep Foundation
202-347-3471
www.sleepfoundation.org
Produces consumer-friendly publications and fact sheets, as well as the results of recent sleep polls.

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
301-592-8573
www.nhlbi.nih.gov
Offers resources on diseases of the heart, blood vessels, lungs and blood and sleep disorders. Search for National Center on Sleep Disorder Research.

References

National Sleep Foundation. "Can't Sleep: Sleep Facts and Stats." www.sleepfoundation.org.

National Institutes of Health sleep report and program grant documents.

National Sleep Foundation. "2002 Sleep in America Poll, April 2002."

Institute of Medicine. "Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem" (2006), Executive Summary, p. 1–22. The National Academies Press: Washington, DC.

www.healthwomen.org

Creating a Peaceful Sleep Environment

If no underlying medical condition is found, your provider should recommend ways to improve your sleep environment. The goal is to create a comfortable, relaxing atmosphere to promote restful sleep. This may include following a nightly routine that helps you unwind before going to bed and eliminating anything that might be distracting, including bright lights and uncomfortable pillows.

Here are some helpful tips:

- Use your bedroom for sleep only. Don't watch TV or pay bills in bed.
- Avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol within three to four hours of bedtime.
- Don't eat heavy or spicy meals before going to bed.
- Maintain regular sleep and wake times.
- Keep the bedroom quiet, dark and cool.
- Take a hot bath or shower before bed.
- Exercise regularly, but not within three hours of going to sleep.

If you are unable to get to sleep, don't lie awake in bed. You will likely become anxious, which can make it that much harder to fall asleep.

Diagnosing Sleep Problems

Identifying the cause of sleep problems can be challenging. Your provider will take a complete medical and sleep history and screen for illnesses. Tools such as the Epworth Sleepiness Scale can be used to measure your level of daytime sleepiness, which can be a symptom of many sleep disorders. If

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. "In Brief: Your Guide to Healthy Sleep" and "Facts about Problem Sleepiness." www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/.

National Sleep Foundation. "Women and Sleep: Women's Unique Sleep Experiences." www.sleepfoundation.org/hottopics/index.php?secid=17&cid=163.

National Women's Health Resource Center. "Women's Health Update, Special Supplement:

you are having trouble sleeping, consider keeping a sleep diary to track your daily activities and sleep patterns. Be sure to take notes for at least 10 consecutive days. This will help you to share important information with your provider.

Your health care professional may refer you to a sleep specialist, so you can be observed in a sleep lab. In this setting, your breathing and movements will be observed, and electrodes will monitor your brain activity. Sleep labs are at major medical centers across the country. To find one near you, visit www.sleepcenters.org.

Treatment Approaches

Sleep disorders can be treated. Appropriate treatment will depend on the individual and on the specific sleep-related complaint. Sleep medications should not be the first or only method of treatment. While drugs are effective for addressing short-term sleep disturbances, experts caution they do not resolve underlying issues, such as stress, fluctuations of hormones or other disorders.

There are a number of treatments used for specific disorders, including medications and, in some cases, iron supplements for restless legs syndrome, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) for sleep apnea and general lifestyle changes for insomnia.

As with other medical problems, sleep disorders should be treated in consultation with your health care provider. Do not try to "fix" sleep problems on your own by taking over-the-counter medicines or herbal supplements.

Sleep Disturbances and Menopause" (May/June 2006). "Facts to Know: Sleep Disorders." www.healthwomen.org

National Women's Health Information Center. "Insomnia: Frequently Asked Questions." www.womenshealth.gov. May 2006.

Kryger, Meir MD. "A Woman's Guide to Sleep Disorders." McGraw Hill Companies, 2004.