

# A good night sleep?

People suffering from sleep disorders may experience such problems as daytime drowsiness, irritability, memory lapse and, in extreme cases, death.

By Andrea J. Stenberg

Most people go to sleep each night and wake up eight hours later, refreshed and ready for a new day. For some, however, the nightly ritual can become a source of frustration, anger and desperation as they try unsuccessfully to fall asleep.

"Depending on which journal you read, 48 percent of the population reports some kind of sleep disorder during their lives," reports Dr. Felix Liu, respirologist at York Central Hospital in Richmond Hill.

Unable to get the rest and rejuvenation they need, people suffering from sleep disorders may experience such problems as daytime drowsiness, irritability, memory lapse and, in extreme cases, death.

The most common sleep disorder is insomnia. Doctors consider it insomnia when a person feels he is not getting enough sleep or is not sleeping properly. Everyone occasionally experiences a sleepless night; however, when this sleeplessness lasts for more than a week, there may be a problem.

Short-term insomnia, one to three weeks, is fairly common. The most common cause is stress, such as starting a new job or writing final exams. Other causes include noise, sleeping away from home, an uncomfortable bed or being too warm or too cold. Expecting to be disturbed can also disrupt sleep; doctors on call often get very little sleep even if their beepers never go off.

Short-term insomnia doesn't usually need treatment. There are several things you can do if you are having difficulty sleeping. Have a hot bath or a hot drink shortly before bedtime to help relax. And yes, warm milk really does help. Avoid smoking, alcohol and caffeine before bedtime. Move your clock so you can't stare at it and get frustrated because it's 11:07 and you're still not asleep.

If you are the type who starts worrying about tomorrow's schedule as soon as your head hits the pillow, set aside a "worry time" before you go to bed. Allow yourself half an hour to get the worrying out of your system before you try to close your eyes for the night. Whatever your strategy for combatting occasional insomnia, remember, eventually it will pass.

Another common sleep disorder is sleep apnea. Dr. Liu estimates that there are as many people in Canada with sleep apnea as there are with diabetes. In spite of the numbers, sleep apnea is still relatively unknown. Sleep apnea causes the sufferer to briefly stop breathing several times during the night. This is caused by a blockage,



usually by the tongue, of the upper airway.

Often the person will snort or wake up and then start breathing again. The sleep apnea sufferer usually doesn't remember waking up during the night and can't understand why he or she feels tired the next morning. Other symptoms of sleep apnea include extreme sleepiness during the day, waking up gasping or choking, waking up

their husbands were snoring and stopping to breathe during the night. The men told me they don't snore and have no problems sleeping," said Dr. Liu.

If left untreated, there are a number of serious, long-term side effects, including high blood pressure, heart rhythm abnormalities and heart failure. Excessive drowsiness caused by sleep apnea may lead to falling asleep while driving. Sleep specialists suspect that many driving accidents may be linked to sleep apnea. In fact, if not treated, 20 to 30 percent of sleep apnea sufferers will be dead in eight years. At this point specialists don't know whether these deaths are directly caused by sleep apnea or due to indirect causes such as car accidents.

There is hope, however. Most sufferers are overweight, and even a small weight loss can greatly reduce the number of apneas. By losing weight, many can eliminate the problem entirely. Weight loss is not the solution for all overweight patients, however. "Sometimes obese people cannot lose weight until the sleep apnea problem is corrected," said Dr. Liu.

For those who are not overweight or are unable to lose weight, the treatment of choice is a device called CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure). It is a mask that forces air into the nose, and keeps the airway open. Although wearing a mask would appear uncomfortable for sleeping, Dr. Liu assures patients they will get used to it.

Al, a Toronto area sufferer of sleep apnea, agrees. "You get used to it. You have to."

Once they get used to the CPAP, over 70 percent of patients continue to use it long-term because their



Sleep paintings in ink by Narina Sarkisyan

symptoms are so greatly reduced.

"It's like night and day. I don't fall asleep during the day, I'm a lot more attentive, no lapses, no forgetting things," says Al. "As the saying goes 'If you have a good night sleep...'"

For thousands of years human beings have been falling asleep every night to rest up for the next day. Although you'd think we'd have it right by now, almost half of us will have problems with this basic function at some time in our lives. In the last 20 years, the medical professional has made great leaps in the understanding of sleep disorders.

## Tips to avoid insomnia

- Avoid all stimulants for at least two hours before bedtime. This includes everything containing caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate, cola), alcohol and tobacco.
- Unwind before going to bed. If working late, stop for at least an hour beforehand. You won't sleep if you are still mentally active.
- Don't do strenuous exercise - apart from sex - before bedtime. But exercise during the day or early evening can greatly improve sleep.
- Don't go to bed hungry. Have cereal or a milk drink (milk contains the natural sedative tryptophan, and drinks containing wheat have been shown to reduce restlessness) or a herb tea containing valerian (another sedative). But avoid a full bladder.
- Keep the bedroom cool (below 24° C or 75° F). Choose natural fabrics to sleep in, and remove heavy covers. A firm mattress is best.
- Don't toss and turn. Movement reminds the brain you're still awake.
- Attitude is important. Try not to get tense or angry. Sleep won't come unless you're relaxed.
- If you don't drop off in 20 minutes or so, get out of bed and distract yourself in another room with a book or TV, so you don't associate the bedroom with sleeplessness.

for no reason, loud snoring, poor memory, irritability, personality changes and headaches.

Sleep apnea affects twice as many men as women. Often sufferers of sleep apnea don't connect their symptoms with their sleeping patterns. Only by looking at other symptoms and talking to spouses or roommates are doctors able to make a diagnosis.

"I have patients I've seen for years who always tell me they have no problems sleeping. Last month I had five patients whose spouses came in to complain that

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