INSOMNIA

Do you have trouble falling asleep? Do you wake up several times a night or wake up too early? Do you often feel tired or drowsy during the day? If your answers are “yes”, you may be suffering from INSOMNIA. Adequate and restful sleep is important for good physical and emotional health. Occasional sleeplessness can happen to anyone, but chronic insomnia can impair mood, memory, thought processes, motor function and coordination, and increase risk of accidents. Insomnia can also diminish the ability to concentrate and make decisions.

Scientists used to think that older people required less sleep than younger ones; they now know that adults need the same amount of sleep throughout their lives. The average person functions best with about 7-8 hours of sleep but this may vary with individual. How well you sleep matters more than how long you sleep. If you feel rested and alert during the day, you are probably getting enough sleep.

SLEEP PATTERN

Sleep is divided into two phases: Rapid Eye Movement (REM) or dreaming sleep, and non-REM or quiet sleep. When we fall asleep, we first enter the non-REM phase, progressing from light to deep sleep. After about an hour, sleep changes into the REM or dream phase. During the course of sleep, we continually alternate between the two phases. As we age, our sleep pattern changes. Starting between the ages of 50 and 60, people spend less time in deep sleep and awaken more easily. Consequently, the quality of sleep is impaired.

CAUSES OF INSOMNIA

Insomnia is not a disease but rather a symptom of a problem. Common causes include:

1. Psychological factors
   - Stress
   - Anxiety
   - Depression
   - Post-traumatic stress syndrome
2. Disruption of “internal clock”
   - Jet lag after travel
   - Irregular work hours
3. Stimulants
   - Caffeine (in coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolates)
   - Nicotine (in cigarettes)
4. Alcohol
5. Medications
   - Diet pills
   - Cold and allergy pills
   - Steroids
   - Some medications for pain, high blood pressure, asthma, depression
6. Medical conditions which interrupt sleep
   - Heartburn
   - Enlarged prostate (in men) causing frequent urination
   - Painful arthritis
   - Hot flashes during menopause
   - Sleep apnea - characterized by interrupted breathing and heavy snoring
   - Restless leg syndrome - characterized by involuntary limb movement
   - Thyroid, lung or heart problem

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TIPS FOR A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

- Establish a regular bedtime routine so you sleep and get up at about the same time each day.
- Avoid long naps.
- Exercise regularly but avoid strenuous activity at least 3-4 hours before bedtime.
- Avoid or limit caffeine, alcohol and tobacco in the late afternoon and evening.
- Keep your bedroom dark, quiet and comfortably cool.
- Relax before going to bed - take a warm bath, listen to soothing music or do some light reading.
- Go to bed only when you are sleepy. If you cannot fall asleep, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy.
- Take a pain reliever to control pain before bedtime.
- Avoid heavy meals and drink less fluid close to bedtime
- Treat underlying medical problems.

TREATMENT FOR INSOMNIA

Short-term insomnia, which lasts a few nights, does not usually require treatment. However, if the problem persists for longer than a week, or if excessive sleepiness interferes with your daily activities, a physician should be consulted. Your physician can help to diagnose or treat the underlying medical or psychological problems. Chronic insomnia can often be treated with lifestyle or behavioral changes and, if necessary, with prescription sleep medication.

Sleep medications should only be taken under your doctor's supervision and for a limited period of time. Long-term use can be addictive and worsen insomnia when discontinued. Over time, prescription sleeping pills become less effective and can distort sleep. Other side effects include dizziness, daytime drowsiness and forgetfulness. Over-the-counter sleeping pills usually contain antihistamines, which induce drowsiness. They usually provide little benefit and carry undesirable side effects. In recent years, the hormone "melatonin" (produced by the brain's pineal gland) has been widely promoted as a "natural" sleep aid. Further research is needed to determine its effectiveness and long-term safety.

If you experience symptoms of insomnia, seek the advice and treatment of your doctor. For more information on sleep disorders, contact:

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