



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 15 October 2008

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Sleeping soundly? You must be dreaming

With the change to daylight saving throughout much of Australia, most of us will have to adjust our sleep patterns, even if just a little. Of course, we have all encountered occasional sleep problems; but having sleeping problems on a regular basis can have significant adverse affect on our ability to lead a normal productive life.

If you have trouble getting off to sleep, or toss and turn and your sleep is generally disturbed, or you feel more weary than wide awake each morning, then you're not alone. Around 30% of Australians suffer with sleep problems.

Sometimes there is a particular and easily identifiable problem – perhaps pain – that causes your sleep to be less than ideal and if this is the case, the underlying cause needs to be addressed. Snoring, restless legs syndrome, night-time cramps and sleep apnoea are also conditions which prevent restful, rejuvenating sleep and cause us to be drowsy when we should be wide awake and alert.

Often, however, your body clock just gets out of “sync” – maybe because of shift work or jet lag. It becomes a vicious cycle. It seems the less you sleep, the harder it is to get to sleep.

Sleep hygiene is the term given to that regular routine which is most likely to ensure regular, restful sleep leading to plenty of energy and enthusiasm when we wake up refreshed. Exercise is an important component of this routine, but strenuous exercise close to bed time is counter productive. Mental exercise close to bed time can also be problematic, so reading in bed is not recommended; unless it's an unexciting book that's bound to send you to sleep. If you are determined to watch late night TV, don't watch a thriller or a horror story. Dreams are important, but nightmares don't make for a good sleep. Healthy sleep does include a stage where dreaming occurs. It's the so called REM (rapid eye movement) sleep which is characterized by intense brain activity similar to that which occurs during the waking state. Breathing is rapid, regular and shallow, blood pressure rises and pulse rate increases.

There are also four stages of non-REM sleep which account for about 80% sleep time in adults. All stages are essential for sleep to be restful and refreshing; and the aim of medicines to induce and maintain sleep is not to disturb these normal sleep patterns, or to do so to the least possible degree.

If you have chronic, (that is long term), sleep problems, there may be some simple ways you can get into a regular sleep pattern more easily. The newly revised Fact Card entitled *Sleeping Problems* gives some valuable tips. This card is available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information.

It's most important to establish a routine. Try to get up out of bed at the same time every day; and once you're up, stay up. It helps your body maintain that natural waking and sleeping rhythm that makes sleep easier.

Avoid caffeine-containing drinks (tea, coffee, cola, chocolate) in the evening. As well as being a mild stimulant, caffeine also causes us to pass water more often; so our sleep can be disturbed by the need to visit the bathroom during the night. If you can't go without your tea or coffee at night, try the 'decaf' varieties.

Exercise is important too, but late evening sport and strenuous work-outs can stimulate the system and make sleep difficult. Afternoon exercise, probably after work and before dinner, seems to be best.

We should be aware that night caps are for keeping the head warm. The alcoholic variety really don't do anything for normalising our sleep pattern. Alcohol can actually disturb the balance between the various stages of sleep and we tend to wake up still a little hung over. And just like coffee, alcohol can also encourage those extra trips to the bathroom.

As well, some prescription and over-the-counter medicines can disturb your sleep. Ask your pharmacist for advice about the possibility of this occurring. If you need a cold and flu remedy the so-called day-time/night-time formulas are worth considering.

Remember that persistent sleep disorders, especially those involving pain or breathing difficulties need to be investigated by your doctor; and you can get more information from your Self Care pharmacy. Phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.