

Prevention c+olumn

FEATURE ON SLEEP – JANUARY 2019

Good night, good health!

We spend about a third of our life sleeping. Sleep has an impact on various areas of our lives and plays an essential role in our psychological, physical and intellectual health. Our bodies need sleep, and the sleep must be of adequate quality in order to be restorative.

**Are you getting enough sleep?
Do you wake up feeling rested
or hungover with fatigue?**

43% of men and **55%**
of women have trouble going
to sleep or staying asleep
at night.¹

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Sleep ORGANIZATION

SLEEP IS ORGANIZED IN CYCLES

- About 90 minutes in length.
- Each cycle consisting of 5 stages.

1 - SLEEP INITIATION

This is the falling asleep stage.

More or less conscious drowsiness takes hold, and breathing and heart rate decrease. During this phase, muscle twitches occur and may cause us to wake up with a start.

2 - LIGHT SLEEP

Adults spend most of their night, about 50% of their sleep time, in this stage. A person is easily awakened in this stage.

3, 4 - DEEP SLEEP

This type of sleep is the most restorative, and it takes up much of the first third of the night's sleep. The person sleeping is very difficult to wake up. This stage may be totally absent during nights when sleep is disturbed.

5 - REM SLEEP

Dreams happen during this stage. Not only are they more numerous, they are more vivid and we are more likely to remember them when we wake up. This stage is more concentrated in the last third of the night.

During the night, 4 to 6 cycles follow each other. Between each of them, we either move to the following cycle or wake up. ■

Is there an optimal number of hours of sleep?

Some people need 10 hours of sleep to feel well and rested, while others are satisfied with only 4 hours.

An adequate night's sleep, for an adult, seems to be 7 or 8 hours.

Some people need to sleep longer, while others are able to function with fewer hours of sleep. However, not many people are able to function perfectly well with only 5 hours of sleep, even though they may like to think they can. In any event, the important thing is to maintain as much regularity as possible in terms of sleep hours. ■

Insomnia^{2,3}

We can all suffer from problems of insomnia at some time or another during our lifetime. We can suffer from transient insomnia (problems of life, worries) or for a medium term (things can still sort themselves out or get worse) or a long term (chronic insomnia). When insomnia becomes chronic, the consequences are felt more quickly: fatigue, poor concentration, memory problems, decreased motivation, physical clumsiness, etc.

People who suffer from chronic insomnia more often become irritable, tense and depressed. They may also develop a feeling of powerlessness: It doesn't matter what they do; nothing seems to help them sleep.

Insomnia, left untreated and persisting for more than a year, puts the person at risk of depression.

Insomnia is more a wakefulness problem than a sleep problem. There are three forms:

- Difficulty falling sleep at bedtime
- Frequent or prolonged periods of wakefulness during the night
- Premature wakefulness in the morning, with an inability to go back to sleep.

If you suffer from insomnia, before you start to take medication or receive another form of treatment, the first step should be to review your sleep habits. Developing healthy sleep habits is just as important as having a healthy diet and being physically active. Numerous habits promote sleep. They are rarely the main cause of insomnia. However, poor sleep habits may exacerbate the problem. While not comprehensive, the advice in the next section can give you a good starting point. ■

5 things you can do to have restorative sleep

REDUCE MENTAL HYPERACTIVITY AT BEDTIME

To make it easier to fall asleep and predispose your body for sleep, it is necessary to plan a period of relaxation (both physical and mental). Refrain from working, browsing on social media or playing video games before going to bed. Screens have a stimulant effect. It's logical, therefore, to make your bedroom a zone that's free from screens and other technological tools (television, electronic tablet, cell phone, etc.).

To promote sleep by reducing your exposure to blue light from screens, go to the source.⁴ You should:

- Choose lights with warmer hues
- Limit your screen time and buy low-blue light bulbs
- Adjust your screen settings to display warmer colours. Some types of software even optimize the display setting on the screen based on geographic position and time of day, to be consistent with the natural daylight cycle.

REFRAIN FROM CONSUMING PRODUCTS CONTAINING CAFFEINE 4 TO 6 HOURS BEFORE BED

Caffeine stimulates your central nervous system. When consumed in the late afternoon or evening, it can make it harder for you to fall asleep, disturb your sleep during the night or make your sleep lighter. Caffeine is not just found in coffee. It's also in tea, chocolate, some carbonated beverages and energy drinks.

BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE. SO TRUE!

Physical activity boosts the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that not only promotes a good mood but also plays an important role in sleep quality. A word of caution, however. If you're active or working out just before going to bed, that can interfere with sleep for the same reasons. It's better, therefore, to integrate physical activity during the day, before we get a visit from the Sandman! Any regular physical exercise also promotes better quality sleep by increasing the quantity of deep sleep, which is the most restorative.

IF YOU WAKE UP DURING THE NIGHT, RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO CHECK THE TIME

Just set your alarm clock to the time that you want to wake up. You may think this is strange advice, but it's backed by scientific research. Just glancing at the time during the night is a subtle stress trigger. You feel anxious about the time that's passing and your sleep-related concerns and insomnia increase in turn. Your brain cannot resist the urge to calculate how much sleep you have had and how long before you have to get up.

HAVE HEALTHY EATING HABITS?

Your diet can play an important role in sleep quality. Do you ever find, when you eat a very light meal, that you're hungry when it's time to go to sleep? The feeling of hunger stimulates the secretion of a hormone that inhibits sleep. On the other hand, a heavy meal that requires a significant digestive effort (e.g. very fatty or spicy foods) can also keep you awake. Once you're lying down and ready to go to sleep, the digestive process systematically slows down and may cause undesirable effects like bloating or cramps. That said, a feeling of fullness facilitates sleep. For that reason, it's best to go to bed with a full stomach, but not over-full, and to have a light snack during the evening. ■

Medication?

The simple and immediate solution to a problem of insomnia is often medication. The majority of sedatives prescribed are benzodiazepines. In fact, for a limited time and at a minimal dosage, these drugs can sometimes be necessary. Unfortunately, many people use them on a chronic basis. Many side effects and health risks are associated with benzodiazepines. They include memory and concentration problems, daytime drowsiness and physical dependence. After only a few weeks, your body becomes used to their action. It may take several weeks to wean you off them, to avoid a recurrence of the insomnia symptoms. When sedatives are discontinued too rapidly, some people may experience a "rebound effect," in which their insomnia symptoms are magnified, and the trouble sleeping is worse than before receiving treatment. Gradual withdrawal of the medication mitigates that effect.

OTC SLEEP AIDS

OTC sleep aids all contain the same active ingredient, which is an antihistamine (diphenhydramine). They are usually used to control allergies and also have the effect of causing drowsiness. Despite their easy access, remain cautious when using sleep aids. Don't forget that you can develop psychological dependence to them. For safe and optimal use, it's smart to ask your pharmacist for advice. In any event, you should only take medication as a last resort. Start by adopting and observing good sleep habits.

MELATONIN: AN EFFECTIVE REMEDY?

Melatonin, AKA the sleep hormone, is a natural hormone that's secreted in the absence of light. It is released in the evening and gradually diminishes during the night, until you wake up. Its role consists of resetting your biological clock. It informs your body that it's time to sleep. Therefore, it is not at all surprising to find synthetic copies of this hormone on store shelves... That said, there are few sound scientific studies on the subject. Moreover, since not all sleep problems are related to melatonin and your circadian rhythm, it's important to begin by finding the cause. Before treating the problem, you need the right diagnosis. If you suffer from insomnia, you should consult a physician, a health professional or a sleep study expert.

Whatever their form, sedatives do not offer a lasting solution.
They only act on the symptoms.

Non-medication approaches, oriented toward healthy sleep habits, should always be your first choice. ■

Yawning apparently boosts alertness

The role of yawning has yet to be fully determined. However, since we yawn more frequently when waking up, are bored or are falling asleep, it seems that its primary function is to help make us more alert. ■

1. The Canadian Health Measures Survey 2007/2008 to 2012/2013.
2. <https://fondationsommeil.com>
3. *Sleep and you* – Dundurn
4. Association des optométristes du Québec