Getting a good night’s sleep is often one of life’s most elusive challenges as we age. Insomnia becomes common because of changes in sleep patterns and health. Whatever your reason for sleep loss, insomnia, the term used to describe difficulties initiating and/or maintaining sleep, can affect you both mentally and physically. Finding ways to improve your ability to sleep is as essential to aging well as a healthy diet and regular exercise.
Causes of Insomnia

Studies show getting less or significantly more than seven hours of sleep a night is associated with a higher mortality rate. Unfortunately, sleep-related disorders become more common with age.

Older adults often develop health conditions which are linked to insomnia such as arthritis, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), prostate conditions and overactive thyroid. A lack of sleep can affect your immune system and recovery time if you do get sick. Not getting enough sleep can also increase your risk for high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

If you suspect that an underlying condition such as sleep apnea, depression or pain is interfering with your sleep, consult your doctor. Effective treatment might lead to more restful sleep.

Check with your doctor to see if the medications you take may contribute to your insomnia. Investigate all the over-the-counter products you take to see if they contain caffeine or other stimulants such as pseudoephedrine. Make sure the pain reliever you take is effective enough to control your pain throughout the night.

The Cognitive Impact

Depression, anxiety and stress can interfere with sleep. Lack of sleep can create cognitive challenges impacting your memory and judgment.

Everyday anxieties, as well as more serious anxiety disorders, may disrupt your sleep. Worrying about your finances or bad health can keep your mind active at night, making it difficult to sleep. Stressful life events such as the death or illness of a loved one, divorce, retirement, or job loss may also lead to insomnia.

Sleep plays a significant role in helping consolidate your memories for future recall. When you are sleep deprived, you won’t perform as well on complex mental tasks and your reaction times may be slower while driving making you a higher risk for having an accident.

Make sure you improve your sleep duration and quality. It will enhance your quality of life. You may even be able to set aside the fear that your symptoms of forgetfulness and impaired judgment are signs of Alzheimer’s or dementia.

Benefits of Lifestyle Changes

Sometimes the most effective approaches to enhance your sleep come from changes to your lifestyle. Sleep quality can be improved with adequate daily exercise, limiting any stimulants you consume, and establishing restful bedtime routines.

Caffeine-containing drinks can prevent you from falling asleep. Nicotine in tobacco products can cause insomnia. Limiting alcohol use can help prevent restless sleep and frequent awakenings.

Taking a candid look at your bedtime routine may reveal you have created a less than ideal sleep environment. Don’t engage in stimulating activities before bed. Take bedtime medications, especially those for pain, in adequate time to get results. Avoid TV, computers, and other electronic devices just before bed, as the light can interfere with your sleep cycle.

Creating a relaxing bedtime ritual that includes soft music, reading printed material, or meditation, can help prepare you for sleep. Engage in strategies to control your breathing, heart rate, muscle tension and mood.

Final Thoughts

Getting a good night’s sleep should not be a dream. Changing your sleep habits and addressing any underlying causes of insomnia, such as medical conditions or medications, can restore restful sleep for many people. Even engaging in some new nighttime rituals may improve your sleep. Rather than tossing and turning or counting sheep, make getting enough sleep a top priority in your healthy aging plan.
Take Action Now

• Watch what you eat and drink. Avoid large meals and beverages before bed to reduce the chance of GERD and improve your sleep. Drink less before bedtime so you won’t have to get up to urinate as often.

• Evaluate your sleep hygiene. Make your bedroom conducive to sleep. Don’t engage in activities other than sleeping or intimacy in your bedroom.

• Limit your naps. If you nap during the day, keep them to a minimum of 10 to 20 minutes.

• Seek out pain relief. If a painful condition bothers you, make sure the pain reliever you take is effective enough to control your pain while you’re sleeping.

• Schedule worry time. Allow yourself a limited amount to time to focus on the things that worry you. You do not have to solve them, just note them. This will help retrain your mind so you don’t focus on them when you are trying to sleep.

• Update your understanding. Pick up a free copy of the Mayo Clinic video on The Benefits of a Good Night’s Sleep from the Patient Education Center, Siebens Building, Subway Level.

• Take a Class. Attend the Patient Education Center’s 60-minute Healthy Sleep Class.

GOAL: Incorporate one new change so you can get 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night.

Expert Insight

Eric J. Olson, M.D., Associate Professor of Medicine and past Co-Director Mayo Clinic Sleep Disorders Center at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

“Your drive to sleep is muted if you are sedentary. Stress can make sleep elusive too. We also often fall into perpetuating activities and thoughts that impact our ability to sleep. Engaging in physical and mentally stimulating activities during the day will strengthen your drive to sleep. Any type of physical activity counts. Engage in structured exercise classes or schedule several walks into your day. Physical activity also diffuses any stress that builds up during your day. Participating in card games or listening to a lecture offer social engagement and mental stimulation. Socializing moves you from constant introspection about your health, family or money and reminds you that you are not alone. Avoid those unintended practices which can sabotage your sleep. This includes drinking too much caffeine or not winding down before bedtime. Don’t call your troubled child right before bed and then expect to sleep. If your self-help is not successful, then go see your physician.”
Charter House

211 2nd Street NW
Rochester, MN 55901

507-266-8572

www.charterhouse-mayo.org

email: charterhouse@mayo.edu

Find us on facebook

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Dan Abraham Healthy Living Center

565 1st St SW
Rochester, MN 55901

507-266-4688

dahlc.mayoclinic.org

email: dahlc@mayo.edu

Find us on facebook