

## SLEEP AND THE OLDER ADULT

### DID YOU KNOW...

As an older adult, you need as much sleep as you did when you were younger.

- Sleep patterns, however, may change with age. The amount of time spent in deeper levels of sleep decreases.
- More than half of people 65 and older who live at home and about two-thirds of those who live in long-term care facilities have trouble sleeping. (Maczaj M. Pharmacological treatment of insomnia. *Drugs* 1993; 45:44-5)

Factors contributing to sleep problems include:

- **Mental health issues** - depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, dementia
- **Physiological** - restless leg syndrome, seniors metabolize medications differently, incontinence
- **Pharmacological** - prescribed or over-the-counter medication, herbal remedies, when you take your water pill, self-medication with use of alcohol and drugs
- **Medical** - chronic pain, heart disease, respiratory illness, arthritis, congestive heart failure, heart burn
- **Biological** - a person's biological clock that controls sleep naturally advances a few hours as a person grows older – i.e. feeling sleepy earlier in the evening and waking earlier in the morning
- **Psychosocial** - caregiver stress, isolation, loneliness, grief, fear of dying, major life changes

### Does This Sound Familiar?

Shirley, 78, came to hospital by ambulance. She had fallen and x-rays showed a broken leg, for which she had surgery.

Several days after the operation, Shirley told nurses she was not sleeping and asked for the same sleeping pill she had been taking at home.

She was given a dose of Tylenol #3 each night as well as a dose of Ativan. She only had a little pain in her leg, but she felt the Tylenol would also help her to get to sleep.

Shirley said she had slept poorly for years, ever since she had developed osteoarthritis and pain in her knees. At first, she only took a prescription sleeping pill after several sleepless nights. Sometimes she took Nytol when she didn't take the sleeping pill. Eventually she started taking the sleeping pill every night after making herself some tea or occasionally having a glass of sherry.

Often she would have a 1-2 hour nap during the day, fall asleep at 7 p.m., sleep on and off and wake up at 6 a.m., never feeling rested.

Shirley also takes Ativan during the day to settle her nerves. She has had a few falls, usually at night. A year ago she fell and cracked some ribs. She decided to stop taking the sleeping pill cold turkey. When she did, she felt awful, so she started taking it again.

Shirley asked her nurse for help for her sleeplessness and her doctor was contacted.

Her doctor explained that Ativan as well as Nytol and other over-the-counter sleep aids should only be used occasionally and for short periods of time. They actually lose their effectiveness if taken regularly. He also explained that she should avoid drinking tea in the late afternoon or evening since it contains caffeine.

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# ***If you are having trouble sleeping at night, keep in mind the following:***

## DO

- Keep regular hours – go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning.
- Exercise 20-30 minutes at least three days a week.
- Limit fluid consumption in the late afternoon and early evening.
- Indulge in some relaxing activity before bed – e.g. a warm bath, light reading, listening to soothing music.
- Create a good sleep environment – sleep in a cool, quiet, dark room on comfortable bedding.
- Develop a sleep ritual – transition to sleep is easier by doing the same things each night just before bed.
- Go outside during the daylight – studies show people who get adequate natural daylight tend to sleep better at night.

## DON'T

- Avoid taking naps during the day.
- Avoid alcohol before bed. It may cause you to feel drowsy at first, but it actually prevents deep, restive sleep.
- Don't do late evening exercise.
- Avoid caffeine in the late afternoon and evening – stimulants such as coffee, tea, chocolates and sodas make it harder to get to sleep and stay asleep.
- Don't worry about falling asleep – stay relaxed. If you can't sleep, get out of bed and return to bed only when you feel sleepy.
- Don't go to bed stuffed or starved – a stomach that is either too full or too empty may cause physical discomfort, making it difficult to sleep through the night.

This newsletter was prepared by the RISK Project of Muskoka-Parry Sound with representatives from the following agencies:

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He said even though a glass of sherry might initially make her feel drowsy, alcohol actually prevents restful sleep and should be avoided in the evening.

Her physician was happy that Shirley asked for help. He reinforced how important it was for her to discuss all of her medications with him and how she was taking them. He also explained to her how important it is to use medications **ONLY** as directed and to **ALWAYS** consult with the doctor before you change how and when you take them. With all of this information, he was able to recommend that she gradually stop taking the tranquilizers and sedatives and he started her on a small dose of tricyclic antidepressant at bedtime.

Shirley continues to take her antidepressant and 500mg of acetaminophen at bedtime when needed. Since Shirley has made these changes, she has started to sleep better and is feeling more rested during the day.