

Not Sleeping? Get at the Root of the Problem



By: Frank Nuber RPh.

Some women pass off disturbed sleep as a sign of aging or stress. Some blame caffeine or other foods that prevent them from getting a good night's rest. And they could all be right.

I frequently hear complaints about disturbed sleep from women in their perimenopausal years. I hear stories of women pacing the floor at 3:00 a.m.; others find solace in cleaning, while others sit in front of the television or computer watching infomercials or surfing the Internet.

The hours between 1:00 and 4:00 a.m. are the worst. What's even more frustrating for many women is that they have no trouble falling asleep, but suddenly find themselves awake, sometimes less than two hours later, for no reason. Then there are those who are physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted – yet they lie in bed staring at the ceiling, sleep nowhere in sight.

Is this a sign of aging? Yes and no. Younger women, not yet perimenopausal, can have these symptoms, too. When sleep is disturbed in this manner, it can be a case of estrogen dominance. And believe me, once hormones are rebalanced appropriately, going to bed means getting the restful sleep necessary to function during the day.

However, other common factors can do a one-two punch on a good night's sleep. The most obvious can be sugar, caffeine or carbohydrates too close to bedtime. For example, there was the case of the woman who awakened every morning about 2:00 a.m. feeling anxious and wide-awake. Her problem stemmed from her habit of eating chunks of cheese just prior to going to bed. Her cheese of choice happened to

contain high amounts of tyrosine, a precursor for the making of a stimulant (noradrenalin) made by the adrenal gland. After discontinuing the cheese, she slept fine.

Another case mentioned by Dr. John Lee M.D. in his book, "What Your Doctor May Not Tell You about Menopause," had reactive hypoglycemia. Her habit of eating sweets at bedtime led to a hypoglycemia episode 90 minutes later that resulted in a surge of adrenaline, which kept her sleepless for several hours. He found that stopping sweets and getting exercise during the day helped her get a good night's rest.

And then there's caffeine. It's not hard to see this as the number one culprit for insomnia given the popularity of soft drinks, coffee and lattes. A client illustrates this beautifully. She was complaining that she wasn't sleeping and had severe night sweats. We assessed her diet, including her intake of soft drinks. She said she "only drank six 20 ounce colas per day and it was diet." With that much soda being consumed, it's easy to see why she wasn't sleeping. The artificial sweeteners caused the night sweats. To see if this could be your reason for not sleeping well, try limiting caffeine intake or eliminating it entirely after 1:00 p.m. daily. Yes, that includes chocolate!

Not getting any exercise is a surefire way to a bad night's sleep. A brisk 10-minute walk one or two hours before bedtime can be a great remedy for anxiety or stress and could be very enjoyable. And

don't forget that great sleep promoter, sex.

If you take prescription drugs to induce sleep, you may be unwittingly causing more harm than good in your body. I don't believe taking drugs such as antidepressants, anti-anxiety remedies or hypnotics (sleeping pills) are a good answer for only but a few indications and then only on a temporary basis.

Here are a few of my reasons why:

- You can develop an unhealthy dependence on the prescribed medication.
- You'll most likely be groggy in the morning despite the TV ads that say you won't be. This increases the risk of falling during the night and in the morning.
- Wouldn't it be better to find the cause of your insomnia instead of treating the symptoms?

There are non-prescription sleep aid alternatives, although they, like their prescription counterparts, are only meant to be taken on a limited basis and don't treat the underlying cause. Melatonin is a hormone secreted by the pineal gland in the brain in response to darkness. Its message to the body is, "sleep time." A safe dose is 0.5mg to 2mg at night only. Non-prescription antihistamines can help on a temporary basis but again carry the side effect of falling during the night or the next morning.

Contact me for more information on how these issues can interfere with your sleep and drag you down over time. Even if you don't have perimenopausal symptoms, consider having your hormones checked. If that's what's causing you to stay up nights, you'll be amazed at how quickly your body will respond to having balanced hormones again allowing you to enjoy the sleep you so desperately need.



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