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Insomnia

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Introduction

Sleeping is the most important basic health care, besides diet and exercise. Insomnia is defined as trouble with either falling asleep or staying asleep despite adequate chances to obtain sleep. There must also be daytime impairments, such as fatigue. Insomnia is a very common condition. 10% of adults suffer from acute insomnia, which is defined as insomnia lasting less than 3 months. Approximately 10% also suffer from chronic insomnia, which is insomnia that has lasted at least 3 months. Unfortunately, people often fail to report their trouble with sleeping to their doctors. Doctors also often fail to ask their patients about their sleep.

There is significant morbidity associated with insomnia. Studies show that those who suffer from chronic insomnia are twice as likely to get into car accidents. In addition, they are likely to experience daytime fatigue, drowsiness, irritability, and to develop depression and anxiety. Studies also show that those who fail to have deep sleep may be compromising their immunity, disrupting growth hormone production, and promoting obesity. Healthy REM sleep is important in order for people to consolidate their memory and to process the emotional baggage from their day.

Causes

What causes acute insomnia? Acute insomnia can be caused by stress due to acute medical illnesses, or environmental stressors, such as the sudden loss of a job. The recent birth of a baby, and post or peripartum depression can also cause acute insomnia. Business people often experience trouble with sleep due to jet lag. Acute insomnia by definition lasts less than 3 months, and the trouble sleeping will resolve as the acute problem resolves.

Chronic insomnia is often caused by long term psychiatric conditions such as undertreated depression, anxiety and/or PTSD. Some may develop insomnia due to chronic medical conditions such as arthritis causing pain at night, prostate disorders causing urinary frequency at night, and neurological conditions such as

Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. Various medications such as beta-blockers, SSRIs (antidepressants), and asthma medications such as albuterol and theophylline can also affect sleep. Over the counter (OTC) cold medications containing Sudafed and or alcohol can cause insomnia as well.

Some people may suffer from sleep disorders associated with restless leg syndrome or sleep apnea. These disorders must be diagnosed by physicians and can cause significant medical complications. If diagnosed, treatments are available and should be pursued.

Alcohol and Sleep

Many people drink alcohol at night to help them sleep. There is a common belief that some alcohol at night will aid sleep, but research is conclusive that alcohol is in fact detrimental. Even drinks consumed 5 hours before bedtime can affect the quality of the deep sleep and make sleep shallow with frequent middle of the night awakenings. Many alcoholics have trouble sleeping, and they tend to increase the amount of alcohol to try to fall asleep. This creates a vicious cycle as the greater quantity of alcohol further disrupts the sleep cycle and quality of sleep.

Aging and Sleep

There is also a myth that being older can compromise sleep quality. Studies have found that this is not true. Older adults who are healthy medically and mentally, exercise and eat complete diets, are more likely to sleep well. However, the elderly who have chronic pain, untreated mental illnesses or who may be taking multiple medications may have trouble sleeping. Overuse of alcohol is another cause of disturbed sleep in the elderly.

Treatments

As many people suffer from insomnia, the majority of cases is due to medical conditions and/or untreated mental illnesses. People suffering from insomnia should first seek a medical consultation to make sure that the sleep trouble is not a secondary one. It is important for people to work on good sleep habits:

1. Don't do stressful things in bed -- such as work.
2. Don't over sleep.
3. If you can't sleep for greater than 20 minutes, get out of bed and do something quiet until you feel sleepy.
4. Don't drink alcohol before bedtime.
5. Try to complete any exercises at least 5 hours before bedtime.

There are relaxation techniques that may help to promote whole body relaxation. Under the guidance of a therapist who is trained in sleep therapy, people can have cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) to improve their sleep. CBT usually consists of multiple sessions during which the patient learns about relaxation therapy, and biofeedback to promote relaxation at night.

Benzodiazepines and non-benzodiazepine sleeping medications are available by prescription only through medical professionals. These agents are recommended to promote relaxation, decrease anxiety and promote deep sleep at the beginning of the sleep cycle. Under supervision by a doctor, these agents can be helpful in the short-term. The danger with these prescription medications is that they can cause dependency and overuse. They are extremely dangerous to mix with alcohol and pain medications that contain opioids.

Long-term use of these prescription sleep medications can cause daytime sedation and memory issues. The elderly must also be careful with use of such medications as they can all cause daytime sedation and increase the risk of falls.

Insomnia is a very common problem that affects many people of all ages. There is significant morbidity associated with this widespread problem. Whenever someone experiences acute insomnia or suffers from chronic insomnia, it is important to consult a physician, because there may be underlying medical or psychiatric conditions.