**Got Insomnia? Simple Strategies for a Better Night’s Sleep**

**By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove**

As the day ends and evening falls, many people look forward to a refreshing night’s sleep. However, there are also a growing number of people who dread crawling into bed because they have trouble falling asleep, have trouble staying asleep or do not sleep long enough. Over 60 million American adults suffer from insomnia. Studies show that Americans over 60 are more likely to experience sleep issues, with women more than twice as likely to suffer from insomnia than men.

Quality sleep is critical for good health. Even if you are eating a well-balanced diet, exercising regularly and are healthy emotionally, lack of quality sleep will take a toll on your body. A recent study from The University of Chicago found those who cut sleep from 8 hours to 4 hours a night for less than one week experienced changes resembling the effects of advanced aging and diabetes. Fortunately, participants were able to recover quickly once they resumed getting 8 hours of sleep a night. However, it’s important to note that just one week of insufficient sleep dramatically impaired the normal physiology of the body. Another 5-year study found women who averaged 6 hours of sleep per night or less had a significantly higher risk of inflammation and heart disease.

Poor sleep has become so common, many people are not aware they are sleep deprived. Failing to get the recommended 7-8 hours of sleep a night on a consistent basis can lead to several health issues such as:

* Increased risk of heart disease
* Increased blood pressure
* Weakened immune system
* Poor memory and lack of concentration
* Hormonal imbalances
* Blood sugar imbalances
* Depression
* Constipation
* Increased cravings for sugar and carbohydrates
* Weight gain
* Increased risk of calcium deposits in the blood vessels
* Increased cholesterol

Insomnia is not a disease but, rather, a symptom of other problems. Getting at the root of the problem can often be complicated since there are many causes of insomnia ranging from medications to menopause. Hormonal imbalances, especially estrogen dominance (a condition from which both men and women suffer) can be a major cause of poor quality sleep. Treating insomnia involves more than just taking a pill. Several studies have shown sleeping pills can cause poor quality sleep, disrupt the body’s natural sleep cycle and be very addictive. Sleeping pills have also been associated with memory problems the next morning, as well as decreased brain activity during the day.

There is no single “simple” treatment for insomnia, but there are a few basic steps you can take to encourage a better night’s sleep:

1. Make your bedroom like a cave….quiet, dark and cool. Turn off the TV, iPads, phones and anything else that can cause excessive light. Keep the temperature a cool 65-68 degrees.
2. Exercise. A 16-week study conducted at Northwestern Memorial Hospital found aerobic exercise, done four times per week, improved sleep so significantly that participants moved themselves from the category of “poor sleepers” to “good sleepers.” The study also found that depression and daytime alertness also improved. Make sure you are exercising at least 30-45 minutes four days a week.
3. Have a consistent bedtime, even on weekends. Getting to sleep before 11 p.m. is important for the body. The body has a natural rhythm, and certain functions take place at regular times. Your liver detoxes from 1 a.m. to 3 a.m. and your colon from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. If you are not sleeping at those times, it can increase toxicity in the body, cause a multitude of symptoms and lead to a decline in health.
4. Have protein at your evening meal. Protein helps release L-Tryptophan, which is needed for the production of melatonin and serotonin. Protein also helps balance blood sugar levels. Waking up at 3 a.m. is often due to blood sugar levels dropping during the night.
5. Avoid sugar and high carbohydrate snacks -- especially at night. These snacks can raise blood sugar levels, making it difficult to fall asleep.
6. Limit alcohol and caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant and should only be consumed early in the day, if at all. While alcohol might make you feel sleepy, it actually impairs your ability to get a good night’s sleep. Avoid alcohol consumption for at least two hours prior to bedtime.
7. Take magnesium to help you relax. You can take a magnesium supplement or soak in an Epsom salt bath to soothe the body and relieve tension. This can also be beneficial for those who suffer with Restless Leg Syndrome.
8. Use relaxing herbs such as valerian, passion flower and chamomile.
9. Have a gratitude journal. List five things you are grateful for before turning in for the night. This helps you focus on the blessings in your life and go to sleep with a positive outlook.
10. Have a relaxing routine. Deep breathing, yoga, meditation and prayer all help to quiet the body and mind, and lead to a good night’s sleep.

If you are interested in getting more information on sleep issues and treatment options, as well as tests that can be done to detect imbalances that can lead to insomnia, please email me at pathwaysth@gmail.com and put “Insomnia” in the subject line.