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Insomnia

by Raymond Francis

While most people will experience an occasional sleepless night, insomnia is a condition where lack of sleep is a regular occurrence characterized by an inability to either fall asleep or remain asleep during the night. Tens of millions of Americans do not get sufficient rest due to insomnia. According to the American Sleep Foundation, more than 40 percent of American adults are so sleepy during the day that it interferes with their daily activity. Falling asleep while driving causes about 100,000 auto-mobile accidents per year. Adequate sleep is critical to achieving optimal health because sleep is restorative. The body does many housekeeping chores while we sleep including repairs to the damage done during the day.

Given the number of people suffering from insomnia and the negative effect it is having on our health and safety, it is useful to explore some of the causes and solutions for this problem. There are many potential causes for insomnia, and often more than one cause is at work. Sometimes it is difficult to find the exact cause in a particular individual. This is why promoting overall health is the best solution. This means learning how to eat a good diet, avoiding toxins and getting adequate physical activity and sunlight.

Diet

To eat a good diet, you need to avoid the Big Four (sugar, white flour, processed supermarket oils, and dairy/excess animal protein) and then eat a lot of fresh, organic fruits and vegetables. Diet can be a primary cause of insomnia.

Caffeine consumption alone is often the cause for many people. Everyone has a different capacity to metabolize caffeine, and some metabolize it very slowly. I have seen cases where as little as one cup of coffee for breakfast can keep someone awake all night. Coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate and some over-the-counter medications all contain caffeine. People who depend on caffeine to get through the day usually feel drowsy in the morning since they haven't had a good night's sleep. By drinking coffee to wake up, a vicious cycle is created. The caffeine perks you up in the morning, but at the same time, it overstimulates the adrenal glands, which causes imbalances later during the day. Even though caffeine may make you feel more awake in the morning, it disrupts the production of melatonin and other hormones, causing insomnia.

If you are suffering from insomnia, and you are using caffeine, you need to permanently get this neurotoxic substance out of your life. One of the best ways to do that is to pick up the book by Dr. Jonathan Wright called *The New Detox Diet*.

Sugar is another problem. Eating sugar, which is found in many foods, causes blood sugar levels to fluctuate between too high and too low. Low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) during the night causes an adrenal stress reaction that disrupts sleep. Stay off of sugar, most especially in the evening.

Food intolerances, while causing restlessness, irritability, fatigue, and inattentiveness during the day, are a common cause of insomnia during the night. Allergic reactions cause the release of histamine, which causes a dysfunction in the biochemical pathways of the brain.

There are various ways to identify food allergies, including a six-day fast and one at a time reintroduction of foods.

Excitotoxins

Excitotoxins are chemicals that excite brain cells. Keeping brain cells excited will interfere with sleep. Even worse, excitotoxins will damage and even destroy brain cells. One class of excitotoxins is called glutamates. Most people have heard of MSG or monosodium glutamate. But there are other forms of glutamates as well, and they are used to enhance flavor in about 80 percent of all processed foods and in almost all fast foods. Glutamates are often hidden on product labels with various names such as hydrolyzed vegetable protein or sodium caseinate. Hydrolyzed vegetable protein is added to everything from canned tuna to soups to baby food. The best thing to do is avoid all processed and fast foods.

Another major excitotoxin is aspartame, an artificial sweetener. NutraSweet is one brand of aspartame. Aspartame is used in numerous diet drinks and sugar-free diet foods. About 40 percent of the aspartame molecule is composed of an excitotoxin called aspartate. When aspartame is metabolized in the body, the aspartate is released. Avoid all products containing aspartame.

Environment

External electromagnetic fields can interfere with the body's electromagnetic field, interfering with sleep. People with untreatable insomnia should consider the possible effects of nearby power lines, electric clocks near the head of the bed, electric blankets and electrically heated water beds.

Mental and Physical

Chronic stress and emotional factors have been long known as major causes of insomnia. Stress and deep-seated conflicts can disturb brain chemistry, and not only contribute to the development of insomnia but to the worsening of it as well. Chronic stress depletes nutrient reserves, disrupts hormone balance and creates a damaging cycle of less sleep and more stress. If these elements are present in your life, you need to resolve and remove them. Meditation, therapy and exercise are all ways of dealing with these problems.

Physical problems such as stomach, bladder, liver, colon and heart problems as well as hormonal imbalances can disturb sleep. My friend, the late Dr. John Lee, used natural progesterone to treat women with insomnia because they suffered from excess estrogen. Many women, because of poor diets and exposure to estrogenic chemicals from the environment become estrogen dominant, and excess estrogen causes sleep disturbances. Fat cells produce a flood of excess estrogen, so losing excess weight can be an important factor in restoring normal sleep patterns. On the other side of the coin, low estrogen can diminish magnesium uptake and magnesium is needed to relax the body and prevent sleep disturbances. Lack of exposure to natural sunlight causes hormonal imbalances that result in chronic sleeping problems.

Conventional Medicine

Conventional medicine's "solution" to health problems is to suppress the symptoms. It's no different for insomnia. Every year millions of Americans are prescribed drugs to help them sleep better. Unfortunately, drugs are toxic, and while they may address a specific symptom, they poison the entire body. This flawed approach not only fails to address the true causes of insomnia, it also creates new health problems as well as dependencies. Sleeping pills depress brain function, decreasing the amount of time spent in health-giving deep sleep. People can suffer withdrawal symptoms and become dependent on the drugs.

Memory is affected and studies show that people actually perform less well after taking sleeping pills than they do after a sleepless night.

What to Do

It is especially important to address caffeine and sugar consumption and food intolerances as causes of insomnia. Keeping a careful diary of everything you eat and drink and how you feel and sleep can help to get insights into the causes of your problem.

For some, something as simple as removing a common allergen like dairy from their diet can cure their insomnia. Removing excitotoxins from the diet is a wise strategy. Since about 80 percent of processed foods, and many restaurant foods, contain excitotoxins, it is important to eat a diet of fresh, unprocessed, organic foods—whole grains, raw vegetables, salads and fruits. Avoid sugar, reduce alcohol consumption and cut out caffeine. Meditating before you go to bed and drinking some chamomile tea can be very relaxing. Get a daily dose of sunshine, as the midday sun daily helps to set the body's clock. Gentle exercising before bedtime, as in rebounding, can also help with sleep. Use environmentally safe mattresses and bedding, as chemicals out-gassing from synthetics can disturb sleep. Hot baths can be helpful. Many naturopaths recommend a hot Epsom-salt bath before bedtime (one or two cups of salt). Lastly, keep your bedroom dark and well ventilated.

Supplements are known to be helpful. Both calcium and magnesium have a relaxing effect on the body, and most Americans are deficient in both. I have used magnesium supplementation to help many people with insomnia. Most Americans are deficient in B vitamins, which are critical to important body functions. For example, vitamin B6 is required for the conversion of the amino acid tryptophan into the neurotransmitter serotonin, which helps to control sleep. B12 is another important vitamin for insomnia. As usual, you have to be careful of what forms of these vitamins you use. Unless you use the correct forms of B6 and B12, you will receive little benefit and may actually do harm. The Beyond Health brand always supplies the very best. N-acetyl carnitine and phosphatidyl serine are also helpful. Herbal remedies are also helpful and have been long used. The most common herb is valerian. Even acupuncture has been shown to be helpful.

Insomnia is no different from any other health problem. Ultimately, it is the result of malfunctioning cells caused by deficiency and toxicity. By addressing causes, cells can be returned to normal, and insomnia as well as any other disease will simply disappear.

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