

You don't have to be Rip Van Winkle to sleep well

"I couldn't sleep last night" is an often heard comment. Such transient difficulty with sleep is common. Insomnia and trouble getting to sleep affect 20% to 40% of adults each year. Many times this is situational. Common situations that can affect sleep include major life changes, such as death of a spouse, birth of a child, loss of a job; environmental factors such as too much noise or light, disruption of a daily routine, or desynchronization of the biological clock that occurs with jet lag or change in the work shift.

Other factors affecting sleep are distinct from these common situations. Numerous prescription and over the counter medications can alter sleep. Decongestants are a common culprit this time of year. Caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco can all affect the quality and length of sleep. Many medical problems can affect sleep as well.

Irregular or poor sleep habits may alone be the cause of insomnia. They may also be part of the problem when another cause exists or when an obvious situational change occurs. Some ways to improve these sleep habits include:

- Avoid spending too much time in bed waiting for sleep. Try not to watch the clock.
 - Avoid daytime naps.
 - Wake up at the same time each day to maintain circadian rhythm. Also try to go to bed closest to the same time each night.
 - Avoid caffeine, colas, and stimulants after lunch time.
 - Refrain from drinking alcohol before bedtime. Even though it may help induce sleep, it may cause frequent awakenings during the night.
- Do not go to bed feeling hungry. You may need to eat a small snack before retiring. Some have advocated eating a tryptophan-containing food, such as milk or tuna, before bedtime. Also avoid a heavy meal before bedtime.
 - Don't smoke cigarettes.
 - Keep the bedroom at a comfortable temperature and as free from noise and light as much as possible.
 - Do not let your children sleep in the bed with you. They will wake you up repeatedly during the night. Sleeping apart will only help them develop good sleep habits.
 - Only go to bed when you are sleepy. If you are awake for more than 10 to 20 minutes, get out of bed and read or do something quiet until you do feel sleepy.
 - Schedule time to relax or wind down before going to bed.
 - Avoid worry or frustration in bed. Shift work causes its own set of problems. When sleeping during the day, it is very important to minimize the noise and light that can easily get into the bedroom. Some have used a fan in the bedroom to generate white noise, blocking out other noises.

If sleep difficulty persists, there may be an underlying medical problem as the cause. See your family physician and discuss this with him or her, especially if your sleep problem has persisted for more than three weeks.