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Insomnia: changing your bedtime habits could help

Sleeping pills are not a long-term solution, but more knowledge about bedtime habits could help relieve insomnia

Cologne, 21 August 2008: Many people sleep better when they are on holiday and wish that they could sleep as well all the time. But according to the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG), it is not only being free of daily worries that can make a difference to sleep. Good bedtime habits can help people to sleep well all year round. Medication provides short-term relief at best. In information published today on www.informedhealthonline.org (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org>) the Institute reports about what bedtime habits could help, how well relaxation techniques work, how sleep changes throughout life and that adults do not generally need eight hours sleep a night.

Sleep medication is used less nowadays

About 1 out of every 5 adults in industrial countries have problems sleeping at some point in their lives. In order to provide reliable information on this issue, the Institute analysed scientific studies that cover a wide range of research on sleep and insomnia.

Sleeping pills - whether herbal or prescription - are being used less than they used to be in countries like Germany. Although products based on herbs like valerian have long been used, the evidence from trials testing their efficacy is far from convincing.

"Prescription sleeping pills can be important in certain situations, but they can cause a lot of adverse effects and are not a long-term solution. For older people, sleep medication can increase the risk of falling, as well as interfering with other medicines," warns the Institute's Director, Professor Peter Sawicki. "Sleeping pills are not the best way to solve underlying problems like depression or painful conditions that are interfering with a good night's sleep."

The habits that can help people get a better night's sleep

Trials have shown that many people could get to sleep a little sooner if they learned relaxation techniques to help them "switch off" when it is time to go to sleep.

Research suggests that a combination of certain habits can help people sleep better. This includes only going to bed when you are tired and ready to go to sleep. Reading and

watching TV in bed could actually make it harder to sleep. If people cannot sleep, it is better for them to get out of bed and do something else rather than focusing on trying to sleep.

Getting up at the same time every morning can help too. Napping during the day might make it harder for you to sleep at night if you are struggling with chronic insomnia.

It is also important to avoid drinking caffeinated drinks and alcohol in the evening. "Most people know that coffee, cola or black tea can interfere with their sleep," says Professor Sawicki. "But many do not realise that alcohol is one of the major causes of a bad night's sleep."

Eight hours a night may not be necessary for everyone

The Institute also looked at research on what is a normal night's sleep. Studies have shown that as we get older, we actually need less sleep on average. While children and teenagers generally need eight or more hours sleep a night, by the time people are 40, they usually only need seven hours a night.

The Institute's website, www.informedhealthonline.org (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org>), provides the public with easy-to-understand information about current medical developments and research on important health issues. If you would like to be kept up-to-date with the latest publications on the independent health information website, you can subscribe to the [informedhealthonline.org](http://www.informedhealthonline.org/newsletter) newsletter (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/newsletter.401.69.en.html>).

Contact:

Hilda Bastian
Editor-in-Chief, Informed Health Online

www.InformedHealthOnline.org (URL: <http://www.InformedHealthOnline.org>)

German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

Tel.: +49 (0)221 / 356 85-0, E-Mail: information@iqwig.de (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/mailto:information@iqwig.de>)

Newsletter

subscription:

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Glossary

evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

depression

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses, and it can be mild, moderate or serious. There are several different types of depression that can be recognised by different signs. Which symptoms of depression occur and how strong and frequent they are vary from person to person. People in any social or age group can be affected, both women and men. If someone has had at least two of the following symptoms for longer than two weeks, it might mean that they are depressed: deep sadness; listlessness; loss of interest in the things they usually care about.

Sources

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at **www.informedhealthonline.org**

Disclaimer

This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.