

Remedies for Sleep Problems

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Ambien, melatonin, Benadryl or behavior therapy?

By Herpreet Kaur Grewal

If New York is “the city that never sleeps,” then between its late-night partygoers and workaholics, it may need a little extra advice on how to get some quality shuteye.

The latest on sleep—a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, out earlier this month—says getting less than seven hours of sleep leads to many sleep-related problems, including falling asleep while driving and difficulty concentrating at work. Sleep is fundamentally important. Amnesty International even classifies sleep deprivation as a human rights violation.

Medication is one of the solutions that can help a person sleep. Common sleep medications that are prescribed include Ambien, Lunesta and Restoril or other over-the-counter sleep aids such as Benadryl and Tylenol.

Dr. Janet Kennedy, a New York-based psychologist and expert in sleep disorders, said non-prescription aids are not designed to help with sleep.

“There are different kinds of medications,” says Kennedy. “There are over-the-counter medications, which are almost always some form of Benadryl or antihistamines. Those are safe but they are not necessarily ideal—typically, over time, the body gets used to Benadryl, so it’s not as sedating.”

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Kennedy adds that in the long-run, the antihistamine in Benadryl can also “dry out your nasal passages, which can be irritating.” Drugs like Benadryl can also cause dizziness, prolonged drowsiness leading into the next day and memory problems.

Prescription hypnotic drugs like Ambien are more effective sleep aids. Drugs like this often help a person fall asleep quickly, stay asleep longer and also have fewer side effects than Benadryl.

Kennedy said Ambien is “not physically addictive, so when you stop taking it, you don’t have a physical withdrawal. Generally, it’s a very benign medication. However, any kind of sleep aid is very psychologically addictive. When you start to take it, you may start to believe you can’t get to sleep naturally.”

Some sleep experts recommend taking doses of melatonin, a natural remedy that is also a hormone found in the body. Melatonin can help to regulate a disrupted body clock. However, the University of Maryland Medical Center suggests that it is probably most effective as a short-term solution for people with jet lag or those who work night shifts. Some who have taken melatonin report daytime drowsiness, headaches and dizziness, according to the Mayo Clinic’s website.

A longer-term solution is cognitive behavioral therapy. “It treats the underlying problems that may cause certain forms of insomnia,” Kennedy says.

According to Kennedy, the therapy “is about creating a routine focusing on how to unwind before bed. But it is also about dealing with thought processes and correcting inaccurate thoughts, like ‘I can never function if I don’t get eight hours’ sleep,’ or ‘My life is out of control because I can’t sleep’ that fuel anxiety... I find that people have a very hard time unplugging at the end of the day. People check emails at night and first thing in the morning, and some who have trouble sleeping check email in the

middle of night. Business is a 24-hour proposition, and this undermines sleep.”

Other activities that work as a part of the therapy are any form of exercise, especially something gentle such as yoga, meditation, playing relaxing music, taking an aromatherapy bath and limiting intake of alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes.

The therapy has been scientifically proven to be more effective and the results are longer-lasting than treatment with prescription sleep medications, according to Dr. Kennedy.

It treats the underlying causes of persistent insomnia or sleep disruption, whereas medication treats only the symptoms. Stopping sleep medication could see a return of symptoms, whereas behavioral therapy’s end goal is to enable a person to sleep naturally without any medication. C

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