



Addressing Women's Sleep Challenges

Women are twice as likely as men to experience sleep issues throughout life and chronic stress is the major cause of insomnia in women. They experience greater stress and anxiety due to the complexity of their modern lives including working outside the home, raising children and caring for elderly parents. The great demands on their time can lead to shortchanging the time spent on their own healthcare including proper exercise and diet, which in turn can impact the quality of their sleep.

Many women turn to prescription medications when experiencing sleep issues out of frustration, but they can be habit forming, create unwanted side effects, and a condition known as rebound insomnia can occur once they are discontinued. Naturopathic medicine following the precept of First Do No Harm, suggests trying the least invasive possible solutions to a challenge first.

1. Create a Bedtime Routine- try warm baths, relaxing music, a cup of herbal tea such as chamomile, and creating a restful bedroom haven that is cool, quiet and dark. Using aromatherapy in bathing, massage or diffusion into the air is highly effective. Pure essential oils of roman chamomile, lavender, marjoram, mandarin, petitgrain, neroli and rose have all been shown to promote relaxation, ease anxiety and improve sleep.
2. Exercise- Exercise is a sleep aid for a variety of reasons including affecting body temperature, providing stress release and reducing anxiety and depression. The benefits are highest when exercise occurs within 3-6 hours of bedtime. Exercise such as walking, low impact aerobics and bicycling for 30-60 minutes 4x week can have a significant positive effect on sleep.
3. Lifestyle Modification- smoking, consuming caffeine, and drinking alcohol can all affect sleep quality. Nicotine is a strong stimulant and can lead to insomnia, stop smoking or avoid it for several hours before bedtime. Caffeine can take up to 12 hours to clear the body, thus none should be consumed within 12 hours of bedtime. Alcohol affects blood sugar levels and can cause restlessness and awakening during the night, limit intake to one glass of wine or the equivalent at least 2 hours before bedtime. Hypnosis is a very effective tool in modifying and eliminating unproductive habits and creating new desirable patterns. Seek out a hypnosis practitioner or try self-help tools such as audio recordings.
4. Light Exposure- sleep patterns and the release of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep, are regulated by the quantity and quality of light we are exposed to. A woman's average daylight exposure is a meager one hour and conversely exposure at night to artificial light from TV, computer, etc can upset the balance creating both sleep-onset insomnia and early morning awakenings. Increasing sunlight exposure or using a bright light box in the morning and reduction of exposure to artificial light before bedtime can help reset the pattern.

BerkanaWay LLC

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Dr. Jennifer Echert, Naturopath, Clinical Aromatherapist

34 N Island Ave, Ste F, Batavia, IL 60510

630.406.1110 www.berkanaway.com

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5. Diet- dietary choices can affect the quality of sleep. The brain signals for food when it grows tired and eating instead of resting can lead to weight gain. Eating too large a meal or spicy foods close to bedtime lead to a restless sleep. Having a snack consisting of a small amount of protein with a carbohydrate before bedtime can balance blood sugar. Suggestions are nut butter on celery or a piece of cheese with apple slices. Foods high in tryptophan like turkey can help create a relaxed state due the affect of the tryptophan on the brain. Be aware of possible food sensitivities as they can trigger insomnia.
6. Nutrition-a balanced diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables along with a good quality multi-vitamin will ensure that deficiencies aren't creating insomnia. B vitamins such as biotin, folic acid, and niacin, as well as potassium, and vitamin D are important key players. Calcium and magnesium are used in the body to offset the effects of stress and a supplement at bedtime can be helpful.
7. Supplements-
 - a. Melatonin- a hormone used by the body to regulate sleep can be a helpful supplement for some, especially for those over age 50. Dosages of .5-3.0mg are recommended taken 1-2 hours before bedtime. Try a small dosage first, as larger amounts can lead to morning drowsiness if it is more than you need.
 - b. Magnesium- a 300mg supplement of magnesium glycinate or malate taken at bedtime eases restlessness. Beware of the oxide form as it can cause loose stools.
 - c. Valerian root herb- is a time honored herbal remedy for insomnia. Several studies have shown it as effective as prescription medications without the side effects. It can make the transition to sleep easier and improve rest. 300-600mg taken 30-60 minutes before bedtime is recommended. A combination with lemon balm is effective for relaxation, and with passionflower it eases anxiety. Combinations with chamomile, skullcap and/or hops are also useful.
 - d. Kava Kava root- kava extracts supplying 120–240 mg of kava-lactones per day in two or three divided doses are recommended to relieve anxiety, this can be helpful in providing a more restful sleep.