

By Mark Chung, M.D.



# Sleep Deprived?

*There's Hope for Insomniacs!*

Approximately one-third of Americans suffer from insomnia. If it takes 30 minutes for you to fall asleep, there's a good chance a sleep disorder exists. The use of stimulants (i.e. caffeine, nicotine or decongestants) may increase the time it takes to fall asleep. Other factors impacting a good night's rest include late meals, heartburn, the use of certain prescription medications, restless legs and even converting the sleeping quarters to a home office such that the body becomes confused as to the purpose of the bedroom.

The most restorative stage of the five sleep stages is Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, which is when your most vivid dreams occur. If you achieve 90 to 100 minutes of REM sleep each night, you'll wake feeling refreshed. But there are a variety of reasons many people struggle with achieving restorative sleep. These include loud snoring, arthritic pain or certain medications, preventing the usual nightly quota of REM sleep. Menopausal women with fluctuations in body temperature are unable to maintain a cool body temperature and pregnant women may have periods of apnea or hypopnea (shallow breathing), along with restless legs.

## Treatment options

Treatment of insomnia requires the review of a two-week sleep diary, medications prescribed and other co-existing medical disorders. The chronic use of hypnotics, alcohol and most anti-depressants will suppress REM sleep, resulting in daytime fatigue, memory loss, irritability and night waking. A careful interview and physical exam by a sleep specialist reveal the "inability to turn off the brain" at night. Such common complaints may require a sleep study to rule out nocturnal breathing, or movement disorders (such as Restless Legs Syndrome), followed by a prescription of medications designed to help promote REM sleep. Over-the-counter melatonin, taken before bedtime, will readjust the body's Circadian Rhythm. More potent drugs are available, but will require a visit with a physician. Meanwhile, practice good sleep habits – avoid alcohol and stimulants, sleep in a cool, dark room and avoid eating a large meal or engaging in vigorous exercise four hours prior to bedtime. **HB**

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