Health blog

Three disorders disrupt sleep

A good night's rest is essential to good health and well being. Not getting enough sleep places you at a higher risk of developing heart disease and other health disorders, may cause weight gain, may accelerate aging and can have negative effects on your memory.

If heart disease, weight gain, wrinkles and forgetfulness aren't enough reasons to make you feel a good night's rest is important, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that fatigue causes 100,000 auto crashes a year.

But for many Americans getting a good night's rest is more complicated than going to bed early. If you are waking up tired, not sleeping through the night or lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, you may have one of the following conditions:

1. Obstructive sleep apnea. If you suffer from this condition, you may stop breathing in your sleep up to several hundred times a night. This can cause your oxygen levels to get extremely low.

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low and cause brain damage in severe cases. Sleep apnea may also increase the risk of high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, congestive heart failure, diabetes, drowsy driving car crashes and possibly even cancer. Untreated sleep apnea often leads to excessive daytime sleepiness, daytime fatigue, poor memory, poor concentration, irritability, depression, morning headaches and loss of sex drive.

2. Restless Legs Syndrome. RLS is a common medical disorder that frequently causes sleep disturbances. Individuals with the disorder might have an urge to move their legs that is usually accompanied by an uncomfortable sensation in the legs, often described as a creepy crawly sensation or just plain pain. Sufferers will have a need to move the legs to relieve the discomfort, and this leg discomfort might worsen during periods of inactivity such as sitting or lying in bed. Symptoms will usually worsen at night. The disorder affects about five percent of adults and is more common in women, especially if they have had three or more children. Unfortunately, RLS’s cause is still unknown, but a deficiency of dopamine in the brain is believed to be involved. RLS can be associated with insomnia, daytime fatigue, daytime sleepiness and non-refreshing sleep (waking up tired).

3. Insomnia. If you have problems falling asleep or staying asleep throughout the night, you may have insomnia. Insomnia can come and go, appear for just a few weeks or be a long-lasting condition. Many cases of insomnia are a result of poor sleep habits picked up over the years, such as not having a set bed time, lack of exercise, lounging in bed while awake and using technology like televisions, computers and smartphones in bed. New information suggests that deficiency of a certain neurotransmitter in the brain could be associated with chronic insomnia. This deficiency may lead to an overactive mind and racing thoughts at night, which may prevent the brain from slowing down at bedtime.

If you suffer from insomnia, consider the following sleep tips:
» Lie down only when you are sleepy and don’t use the bed for anything except sleep and sex.
» Do not read, watch TV, eat food, use computers or play video games in bed.
» If you cannot fall asleep after 10 minutes in bed, do not try harder to fall asleep. Instead, get out of bed, go to another room and engage in a calming activity.
» Do not nap during the day if possible, and avoid alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco prior to bedtime.
» Create a comfortable sleep environment and bedtime routine. Go to bed at the same time, set your alarm clock and get up at the same time each day.

If you feel you may have one of these conditions, talk to your doctor about being referred to an accredited sleep center for a sleep study. Overnight studies are usually videotaped, and activities such as brain waves, air movement through your nose and mouth, snoring, heart rate, oxygen saturation and leg movements are monitored to help identify disorders. Sleep disorders can be treated, so there is no reason not to get a good night’s rest.

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