

Pillow talk

Insomnia might be a transient phenomenon and for the unfortunate, it might turn out to be chronic. However, it has damaging consequences, in both cases. Fatigue, inability to concentrate, irritability, vision problems, drowsiness, and zoning out during the day are some symptoms of insomnia as well as involun-

production. Protein is vital for cell growth, cell-renewal, and repair of physiological damage caused by stress, UV rays and high-activity levels. The Rapid Eye Movement (REM) period of sleep is also the time when the body concentrates on physical repair processes such as repair of cells and tissues and antibody production

stress, anxiety, depression and anxiety-related disorders, which are all too common in urban areas and, any kind of physical illness are the main causes of insomnia." The fiercely competitive workplace and a stressful educational environment also play a big part in turning a person into an insomniac. What's more is that some people deliberately cheat on sleep to fit in hectic schedules.

People who are more susceptible to insomnia are doctors and professionals such as those in the media, advertising and finance industries. These persons work abnormally long hours and are therefore more prone due to stress and a forced adherence to irregular sleep schedules. Modern technology, which has given us PCs, laptops, PDAs and cell-phones, especially those, which accept e-mail, keep us in a constant state of high-alert through day and night and contribute to insomnia by making it tougher and sometimes impossible to unwind, relax and finally sleep. Insomnia is also a major stress-factor in the lives of frequent fliers especially those who cross two or more time zones in a short-span of time.

Although any person can develop insomnia, it is important to note that individual sleep needs vary. Babies need about 18 hours; adults need anything between five to 10

tary microsleep or very brief sleep episodes in an otherwise awake person. In chronic cases, insomnia contributes to obesity, early burnout, depression, neurotic and psychological problems, physical illnesses resulting from decreased immunity, and impaired social/family relationships because of the increased irritability and stress.

Experiments at Professor Allan Rechtschaffen's Sleep Laboratory, University of Chicago, showed that rats continuously deprived of sleep for a fortnight inevitably died.

There are biological reasons why sleep deprivation has negative effects. Deep sleep coincides with the release of growth hormones in the young as well as increased protein

to bolster the immune system. REM time is also linked to assimilation of knowledge, events and emotional rebalancing, another reason why we perform better after a good night's sleep and are also more emotionally stable. Sleep boosts the mental processes and memory, enhancing your productivity and creativity. It also conserves energy because of decreased metabolic rate and reduced body temperature.

There can be a single reason or a combination of causes for you not being able to catch your quota of forty winks, explains Dr Isaac Mohan, Head, Department of Psychiatry, at the prestigious National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences, "Typically,

hours or sometimes, more. People with a high BMR (Basal Metabolic Rate), or those whose energy needs have been increased due to illness or pregnancy, necessarily need extra sleep.

Today, when appearance and body image are said to affect career prospects and the duration of marriages, it helps to know that sleeplessness reflects on the skin, making it look harsh, dry and saggy. Conversely, a rested mind makes the body especially the skin and eyes, radiant and healthy. In fact, ugly under-eye bags can visibly reduce with good sleep. Better, therefore, to invest in good sleep before you spend on expensive anti-ageing treatments.

Sleep is indeed one of our most important basic needs, but unlike other basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter, it just can't be met with money. Insomnia is an indiscriminating predator affecting people across classes and educational levels. So, what does the insomniac, chronic or occasional, do? Of course, you can consult a doctor—a general practitioner or a psychiatrist if the problem is acute. The ideal first solution, according to Mumbai-based psychiatrist Dr Dayal Mirchandani, is, "to practice an attitudinal change of learning to let go. Taking your worries to bed—about family, home or job—is the surest way to destroy the chance of a good sleep. Also, ensure sleep hygiene—a clean and uncluttered room, fresh bed linen and curtains, and the temperature should be just right." A comfortable bed and mattress of the correct size and

support are important.

Aromatherapy and music therapy are proven remedies for insomnia. Yoga helps because one of its benefits is acquiring control over your body's processes. It has also been defined as Chitta Vruthi Nivritthaha or that which controls the mind's natural restlessness. Naturopathy recommends light exercise during the day, and a light dinner of soups, salads and fruits a couple of hours before bedtime.

Explains Kolkata-based general practitioner Dr Saurbh Dasgupta, "Going to sleep around the same time and also waking at a regular time, trains the body's

limbic system, which is the sleep centre in the brain, to a healthy sleep routine." Unfortunately, many people resort to tranquilisers and sedatives—it seems easier to pop a pill than make a painstaking attitudinal/lifestyle change. Psychiatrists say there is an unfortunate tendency, especially in urban areas, to self-medicate and/or to increase the prescribed dose. In fact, there are cases of people taking up to 40 sleeping pills a day, a lethal dose for an ordinary person, but a usual nightly dose for an addict whose body has become habituated to it through a gradually increasing dose. Dr Dasgupta warns, "Sedatives might be necessary briefly for certain medical conditions, but taking them regularly is wrong as they are harmful, habit-forming and don't really give satisfactory sleep—you never wake feeling as fresh and energised as after natural sleep."

Robbing your body of the sleep it needs is like being over-



drawn at the bank. Eventually the body will demand that the sleep debt be paid. It is your choice whether you want to pay it with a lifestyle change or medicine-dependency. □

GET THAT SHUT-EYE

- 1) Ayurveda prescribes many nightcaps, for example, warm milk with honey, coriander juice, etc.
- 2) Eating turkey for dinner will have a similar effect since it contains tryptophan, a natural sedative.
- 3) Keep your bedroom clean especially the bed. Also, keep the room cool, warm, dark and quiet—so preferably no TV. Ensure that your mattress, bedsheets, blankets and pillows are proven of optimum comfort to you.
- 4) Aromatherapy—Inhale gentle fragrances at night. Sandalwood, lemongrass or lavender incense or any of your favourite fragrances. Try this—steep 20 gm of chamomile herb in 600 ml approx of boiling water for about half an hour. Then strain the liquid into your bath. Relax in it for half an hour and you will be ready for bed.
- 5) Music therapy — Especially listening to what are considered languor-inducing ragas, which exist in both Carnatic as well as Hindustani music.
- 6) Scrupulously avoid vigorous exercise, alcohol, tobacco and caffeine (coffee and tea) two to three hours before bedtime.
- 7) Go to bed and wake up around the same time every day.
- 8) Try to switch off—mentally and emotionally—from your work and domestic problems before hitting the bed.

Aruna Chandaraju

We have all probably experienced it at some time or the other. The sheer misery of turning and tossing in bed trying to fall asleep as our mind races over the worries and disappointments of our lives. And sometimes, worrying about how to handle tomorrow because of sleeplessness—an anxiety which further fuels insomnia. Here is how you can sleep better...