Get back to sleep using these good methods

Posted by Dr. Dennis Auckley, MetroHealth Medical Center  May 28, 2008 01:39AM

Categories: Impact, Netwellness

Q. Lately I am having trouble staying asleep. I am able to get to sleep with no problem most nights, but I often wake up at 3 a.m. and can't get back to sleep for two hours – sometimes longer. I go to bed around the same time every night, usually between 11:30 p.m.-12:15 a.m., hoping that staying up later will help me sleep better. Is there anything else that can be done?

A. Waking up in the middle of the night and experiencing difficulty getting back to sleep can be troublesome. This is a form of insomnia known as "sleep maintenance insomnia," and may result from a number of varied causes.

• Breathing disorders in sleep.
• Leg jerks during sleep or wakefulness (known as periodic limb movement disorder or restless legs syndrome, respectively).
• Depression.
• Anxiety.
• Conditions associated with pain.
• Heartburn.
• Side effects from medications or substances (such as caffeine, alcohol or nicotine).
• Circadian rhythm disturbances.
• A poor sleep environment.

How to improve sleep habits

Sometimes, simply improving sleep hygiene and sleep-related behaviors can help.

• Maintain a regular wake time, even on days off work and on weekends.
• Keep a regular schedule for meals, medications, chores and other activities to help keep the inner clock running smoothly.
• Avoid napping during the daytime. If you do nap, try to do so at the same time every day and for no more than one hour. Mid-afternoon (no later than 3 p.m.) is best for most people.

• Do not spend excessive amounts of time in bed. Use your bed only for sleep, intimacy and times of illness.
• Try to exercise regularly. Vigorous exercise should be limited to earlier in the day, at least six hours before bedtime. Mild exercise should be done no more than four
hours before bedtime.

• Avoid caffeine within six hours of bedtime. “Reasonable” caffeine consumption is the equivalent of about one to two cups of coffee per day.

• Do not drink alcohol when sleepy. Even a small dose of alcohol can have a significant effect when combined with mild tiredness, and the combination of the two can make you very sleepy. In addition, alcohol tends to cause sleep disruption after the first few hours of sleep. Do not drink alcohol while taking sleeping pills or other medications.

• Avoid heavy meals before bedtime.

• Avoid using nicotine close to bedtime or during the night.

• A relaxing pre-sleep ritual such as a warm bath (not a hot shower), light bedtime snack, or 10 minutes of reading may help.

• Try to go bed only when you are drowsy.

• Make sure the bedroom is quiet, dark and comfortable.

How you act when you wake up during the night can also affect whether you get back to sleep. Don’t just lie in bed when you can’t sleep; avoid watching the clock and don’t do anything that will wake you up further, such as smoking or watching TV.

If addressing some of the issues I mentioned here doesn't work, see a sleep specialist for additional evaluation. In most cases, sleep maintenance insomnia can be treated successfully.

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