

Sleep revived

Formula for a good night's rest

Sherrill Sellman, ND

For millions of sleep-deprived Canadians, a restful eight hours of shut-eye has

Sleep is the ultimate rejuvenation elixir. During deep sleep, brain activity that controls emotions, decision-making processes, and social interactions shuts down, allowing us to maintain optimal emotional and social functioning when we are awake.

A good night's sleep also plays a critical role in strengthening the body's immune defences. One of the body's most powerful cancer fighters, called tumour necrosis factor, increases tenfold during a restful sleep. This is also the stage when cell growth and cell repair takes place.

In one study undertaken by German researchers at the University of Luebeck, and reported in *Psychosomatic Medicine* in 2003, volunteers were vaccinated against hepatitis A infection. When they had a good night's sleep afterwards, they showed a stronger immune response to the vaccine. The well-rested group displayed nearly twice the antibody level of the sleep-deprived group.

The quantity and quality of sleep impacts on many health problems. For example, insufficient sleep affects growth hormone secretion that is linked to obesity. Insufficient sleep impairs the body's ability to use insulin, which can contribute to the onset of diabetes.

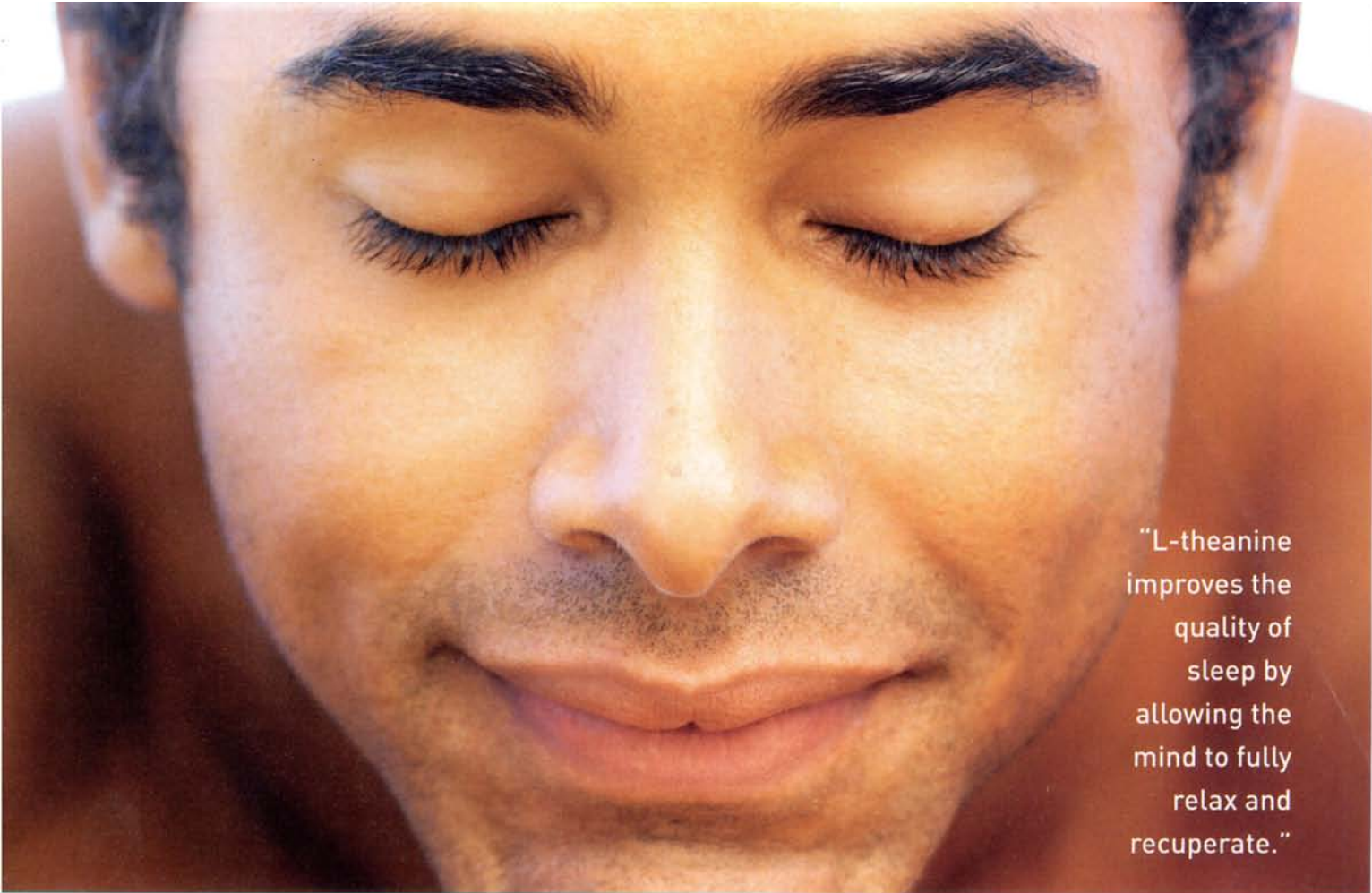
Scientists have found increased blood levels of stress hormones in people with chronic insomnia, suggesting these people suffer from round-the-clock activation of the body's system for responding to stress. Insomniacs have increased production of the stress hormone cortisol, which not only prevents them from sleeping, but also leads to depression, high blood pressure, obesity, osteoporosis, and hormonal imbalances such as PMS, infertility, and menopausal symptoms.

However, reaching for that bottle of prescription sleeping pills or tranquilizers may not be your best choice. They not only shut down the brain, but prevent the mind from relaxing and recuperating, causing people to feel groggy or "out of it" upon waking. These medications also have numerous side effects and can be addictive.

L-theanine to the rescue

Fortunately, there is now an effective, natural solution found on your health food store shelf that will help you get your quota of 40 winks and reduce sleep-robbing stress as well.

Drinking tea has long been popular in Asian countries not the least for its many health benefits, including its calming influence on the mind and body. Fifty years ago the Japanese



"L-theanine improves the quality of sleep by allowing the mind to fully relax and recuperate."

become a rare luxury.

discovered tea leaves contain an amino acid called L-theanine that has amazing relaxing effects. It is present in black tea and even more so in green tea, albeit in very low concentrations, where its soothing influence is neutralized by the action of caffeine.

One of L-theanine's benefits is its ability to initiate an alpha brain wave pattern that signifies a relaxed physical and mental state without drowsiness or impaired motor skills. An alpha state also helps improve learning and concentration, strengthen the immune system, and alleviate stress-induced hormonal imbalances. L-theanine also increases levels of dopamine, another brain chemical with mood-enhancing effects.

A research study published in 2001 in *Alternative and Complementary Therapies* found an increased alpha brain wave pattern just 30 to 40 minutes after consuming 50 mg to 200 mg of a L-theanine supplement.

A recent clinical trial at the National Institute of Mental Health in Japan involving 22 young men pointed to L-theanine's ability to promote quality sleep. When 200 mg of L-theanine was taken before bedtime, it enhanced the quality of actual sleep of all the participants. In fact, upon waking, all

reported a significant absence of "feeling exhausted," and a reduced need for sleep. The study also indicated that L-theanine produced a notable improvement in sleep efficiency—an index of actual sleep time enjoyed between the time of falling asleep and waking. To add icing to the cake, test subjects reported a superior mental state prior to falling asleep and a decrease in nightmares.

The study confirmed that L-theanine improves the quality of sleep by allowing the mind to fully relax and recuperate. This is why the subjects did not report feeling groggy and felt refreshed and alert upon waking.

Without any known side effects, L-theanine is truly an answer to the prayers of the bleary-eyed who will finally be able to "sleep and perchance dream" soundly and peacefully. **a**

Sherrill Sellman, ND, is a naturopath, psychotherapist, international lecturer and women's health advocate, and the author of *Hormone Heresy: What Women MUST Know About Their Hormones* (Get Well International, 2000).