

Dreaming of a Good Night's Sleep

LIKE SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET WHO WISTFULLY HOPED "TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE, TO DREAM," MANY OF US ARE ALSO IN SEARCH OF A NIGHT'S RESTFUL SLEEP. WE'RE EVER HOPEFUL that when we slip between the sheets at bedtime, we might be rewarded with a blessed snooze. It is really so much to ask for? It seems so, at least for the millions of Americans who find a night's sleep to be an impossible dream. ★ According to the National Sleep Foundation, nearly seven out of 10 Americans experience frequent sleep problems, although most have not been diagnosed. This means that millions of Americans are either staring at the ceiling counting sheep each night in hope of falling asleep or tossing and turning, unable to get back to slumber land. ★ Modern life brings with it many unsettling changes that could never have been anticipated. Before the invention of electricity, which gave instant illumination to our homes and cities, most Americans slept an average of 10 hours a night. That number has been steadily decreasing. By the 1950s and 1960s, a night's sleep was reduced to eight hours. With the hectic pace and stress of the 21st century world, sleeping only seven hours a night became the average. Presently, more than one in three people admit sleeping six hours or less. Few people realize that this sleep deficit is a serious threat to their health and well-being. ★ We were born to sleep. Plants sleep; animals sleep and, of course, humans sleep. Have you ever wondered why getting some good shuteye each night is an essential part of your daily rhythms? ★ As it turns out, the ultimate rejuvenation elixir of life is sleep. It is vital for the maintenance and repair of our body and mind. Sleep is actually a dynamic process with three distinct and necessary cycles. Each night we cycle through these stages of sleep ranging from light sleep to deep sleep and finally, to rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. A complete sleep cycle takes 90 to 110 minutes on average. While sleeping, our brains are using important neuronal connections that might otherwise deteriorate from lack of activity. During deep sleep, brain activity that controls emotions, decision-making processes and social interaction shuts down, allowing us to maintain optimal emotional and social functioning when we are awake. This is also the stage when cell growth and cell repair takes place to combat the effects of stress. Thus, deep sleep can truly be called beauty sleep.

Sleep, the Healing Balm

Sleeping deeply and waking up refreshed is a prerequisite for good health. A good night's sleep plays a critical role in strengthening the body's immune defenses. One of the body's

most powerful cancer fighters, called tumor necrosis factor, increases tenfold during a good night's sleep. However, without that slumber, natural killer cells, another important part of the immune system's cancer defenses, is noticeably weakened. ★ Any health assault is withstood with a strong immune system. In one study 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 levels of hepatitis A antibodies in the blood of the subjects were measured for the following 28 days after vaccination. Half of the group received a full night's sleep after being immunized, while the others were kept awake that night and the following day. Four weeks later, the well-rested group on average had nearly twice the antibody level of the sleep-deprived group. ★ Studies have also found a relationship between the quantity and quality of sleep and many health problems. For example, insufficient sleep affects growth hormone secretion that is linked to obesity; as the amount of hormone secretion decreases, the chance for weight gain increases. Blood pressure usually falls during the sleep cycle, however, interrupted sleep can adversely affect this normal decline, leading to hypertension and cardiovascular problems. In addition, insufficient sleep impairs the body's ability to use insulin, which can contribute to the onset of diabetes. ★ Difficulty sleeping is also associated with insomnia. Insomnia most commonly consists of difficulty falling asleep. It affects 20 to 40 percent of American adults at some point in their lives. In fact, 50 percent of senior citizens have difficulty falling asleep on any given night. ★ You cannot really understand the problem of insomnia without acknowledging its relationship to stress. Scientists have found increased blood levels of stress hormones in people with chronic insomnia, suggesting that these individuals suffer from sustained, round-the-clock activation of the body's system for responding to stress. ★ For this reason, the researchers suggest that doctors who treat insomnia should go beyond improving the quality or quantity of their patient's sleep and focus on reducing this hyper arousal, which is a risk factor for both psychiatric and medical illness. ★ In fact, 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. ★ The fact of the matter is that our escalating pace of life, work pressures and aging are the primary reasons many health professionals now believe that

Tips for a good night's sleep

sleep disorders are the number one health problem in America. ★ However, reaching for that bottle of prescription sleep medications may not be your best choice. They are typically “knock out” products such as sleeping pills, tranquilizers, etc., which not only shut down the brain but also prevent the mind from relaxing and recuperating. This is why we often feel groggy or “out of it” upon waking. Another concern is that these medications all have side effects and can be addictive. Fortunately, there’s a natural solution that will not only help you get your quota of 40 winks but reduce sleep-robbing stress as well.

Sleep in complete darkness or as close as possible. When light hits the eyes, it disrupts the circadian rhythm of the pineal gland and production of melatonin and serotonin. ★ Get to bed as early as possible. Our systems, particularly the adrenals, do a majority of their recharging or recovering during the hours of 11 P.M. and 1 A.M. In addition, your gallbladder dumps toxins during this same period. If you are awake, the toxins back up into the liver, which then secondarily backs up into your entire system and causes further disruption of your health. ★ Avoid caffeine. A recent study showed that in some people, caffeine is not metabolized efficiently and therefore they can feel the effects long after consuming it. ★ Avoid alcohol. Although alcohol will make people drowsy, the effect is short lived and people will often wake up several hours later, unable to fall back asleep. Alcohol will also keep you from falling into the deeper stages of sleep, where the body does most of its healing. ★ No TV right before bed. Even better, get the TV out of the bedroom. It is too stimulating to the brain and it will take longer to fall asleep. ★ Avoid before bed snacks, particularly grains and sugars. This will raise blood sugar and inhibit sleep. Later, when blood sugar drops too low (hypoglycemia), you might wake up and not be able to fall back asleep. ★ Read something spiritual, uplifting and inspirational at bedtime. ★ Take a hot bath, shower or sauna before bed. When body temperature is raised in the late evening, it will fall at bedtime, facilitating sleep. ★ Get daily exercise. Exercising for at least 30 minutes during the day can help you fall asleep. Do not exercise before bedtime, however.

induced hormonal imbalances. ★ L-theanine’s ability to reduce stress has been documented in numerous human studies, which have shown an increase in alpha waves just 30 to 40 minutes after consuming 50–200 mg of a Suntheanine supplement. Whenever the stress response can be reduced, the negative effect of high cortisol levels is significantly lessened. ★ Not only is L-theanine an important ally for getting those stress levels in check but it has recently been discovered that Suntheanine also has an important role to play in creating what so many Americans are seeking—a deep and restful night’s sleep, naturally. ★ A recent clinical trial conducted at the National Institute of

The Secret Hidden in Green Tea

Tea drinking has been popular in Asian countries for thousands of years. Even though tea contains significant amounts of caffeine, Asians enjoyed their daily tea drinking ritual for its many benefits, including its calming influence on the mind and body. ★ How is this possible? The answer is found in a special ingredient from the leaves of the tea plant. About 50 years ago an amino acid called theanine, with amazing relaxing effects, was first discovered in tea leaves, especially green tea. Although normally you would need to drink 10 to 40 cups of tea daily to receive any appreciable amount of L-theanine, one Japanese company has successfully developed a patented enzymatic process for making a compound that is a “pure” form of L-theanine, known as Suntheanine. It is the identical form of the amino acid in green tea. ★ This amino acid, a derivative of one of the brain’s neurotransmitters, is best known for creating a sense of relaxation by reducing stress and anxiety. It is so effective in dealing with stress that the Japanese have added L-theanine to more than 50 products including beverages, ice cream, jelly candy and gum. For many hard working Japanese, stress relief is just a candy bar away! ★ Although extensively used in Japan, L-theanine and its many stress and anxiety alleviating benefits have only recently been available as a dietary supplement in the U.S. ★ When it comes to stress reduction, L-theanine helps the brain switch to an alpha brain wave pattern. Alpha waves signify an awake, alert and relaxed physical and mental state of being without drowsiness. In addition, accessing an alpha state helps to improve learning and concentration, strengthens the immune system and alleviates stress

Mental Health in Japan has proven 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 test subjects. In fact, all the participants reported a significant absence of “feeling exhausted” and a reduced need for sleep when using Suntheanine. In addition, the study showed that L-theanine produced a notable improvement of what is known as sleep efficiency, an index of actual sleep time enjoyed between the time of falling asleep and the final morning awakening. To add icing to the cake, test subjects using Suntheanine reported a superior mental state prior to falling asleep and a decreased occurrence of nightmares. ★ The study confirmed that Suntheanine does not promote sleep or increase the duration of sleep, but rather improves the quality of sleep by allowing the mind, while in a sleep state, to fully relax and recuperate. This is why the subjects did not report feeling groggy but rather felt refreshed and alert upon waking. ★ L-theanine is a much needed solution to the two major problems currently compromising so many American’s health and overall well-being—stress and sleep deprivation. ★ Without any known side effects, L-theanine is truly an answer to the prayers of bleary-eyed Americans who will finally be able “to sleep [and] perchance, to dream” soundly and peacefully. ■

Sherrill Sellman, N.D., author of the best-selling book, *Hormone Heresy: What Women MUST Know About Their Hormones*, international lecturer and psychotherapist, can be contacted at golight@earthlink.net. Her free monthly HormoneWise e-Digest is available at www.sellman.com.