

Stealing Slumber: An Overview of Sleep Disorders

Having some trouble sleeping? You're not alone. In fact, research has shown that one in two Americans has had difficulty sleeping at some point in their lives. Worse yet, a whopping 40 million of us suffer from a significant amount of sleep loss each night. We're not talking about the occasional toss-and-turn, or even the rare, before-the-alarm awakening. We're talking about sleep disorders – documented, medical conditions that can become quite serious if not diagnosed and properly treated by a physician.

The Culprits

Sleep disorders are defined as any disturbances that occur during sleep, and cause a person to be unrefreshed when they awake. Common sleep disorders include ***insomnia***, ***sleep apnea***, ***narcolepsy***, and ***restless leg syndrome***. A result of poor quality sleep (or a lack of sleep altogether), these rest-robbers can affect your mood, your ability to focus and remember, and even your health.

A person experiencing ***insomnia*** is unable to fall or stay asleep. He might wake up repeatedly in the middle of the night, or much too early in the morning. Insomnia can be caused by several factors, including stress, depression, drug and/or alcohol use, changes in sleep/wake patterns (like working a new shift or suffering from jetlag), as well as certain medical conditions. People who suffer from insomnia feel drowsy and irritable throughout the day, and have trouble focusing on what seems to others as simple tasks.

Sleep apnea is another common sleep disorder. People with this condition stop breathing for a very short time, several times throughout the night. Sleep apnea is characterized by loud snoring, as well as a feeling of drowsiness throughout the day. It can become detrimental to a person's health, frequently leading to high blood pressure ... even heart attacks, heart failure and stroke.

When the brain mixes messages about when to sleep and when to be awake, the result is a condition called ***narcolepsy***. This sleep disorder is very frightening, because people who suffer from it fall asleep when they don't want to, often without any warning. If not diagnosed and properly monitored/medicated by a physician, narcolepsy can severely limit a person's ability to interact with others, maintain a job or drive a car. The condition is also known to be hereditary.

Restless leg syndrome is another disorder that robs its victims of much-needed sleep. A person with restless leg syndrome experiences unpleasant sensations (like creeping, tingling or pulling) in her calves, lower legs, and occasionally her arms. Hard to diagnose, this condition is often mistaken for nervousness, insomnia, stress or arthritis. It is more prevalent in women than in men.

Sending Sleep Disorders Away for Good.

Sleep disorders are scary business. The good news is, however, that all of the conditions we've outlined in this overview are diagnosable and effectively treatable. Talk to your healthcare provider if you are experiencing or have experienced any of the symptoms listed above. He or she can prescribe the proper medications if needed, and outline some beneficial ways (like practicing good "sleep hygiene" and knowing which type of mattress is best) for you to start getting the rest and relaxation your body needs.

References:

Did You Know? Retrieved April 11, 2004 from website:

<http://www.sleepdisorders.com>

Sleep Disorders. Retrieved March 6, 2004 from National Neuroscience

Institute website: <http://www.nni.com.sg/sleep.htm>

Sleep Disorders. Retrieved March 6, 2004 from The National Women's

Health Information Center website: <http://www.4woman.gov/faq/sleep.htm>