A photograph of a woman lying in bed with a young child. The woman is looking towards the camera with a thoughtful expression, her hand near her face. The child is lying next to her, partially covered by a patterned blanket. The scene is lit with soft, warm light, creating a calm and intimate atmosphere.

The Big Sleep (Debt)

BY LINDA MEIERHOFFER

IF YOU ONLY MAKE ONE PROMISE TO YOURSELF IN THIS NEW YEAR, IT SHOULD BE TO GET A BETTER NIGHT'S SLEEP.

The party balloons have lost their helium, and the hats and horns have been put away until next year. It's time for our newly-elected leaders to keep their promises and help us dig this country out of its trillion dollar debt. But there is another kind of debt that we need to fix, one that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) says accounts for \$16 billion in annual healthcare expenses. It's the one that a leading researcher sums up like this: "We're a sleep-sick society." According to William Dement, MD, PhD, it's one "that is accumulating sleep debt every day."

So what, besides post-holiday angst and money worries, is making 70 million Americans sleepless from Seattle to New York? Researchers have answered that question by identifying more than 80 different sleep disorders that affect us, ranging from the inconvenient to the deadly dangerous. Two statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration illustrate just that: Sleep-deprived people who drive are responsible for 100,000 car accidents and 1,500 deaths each year. Did that wake you up?

The A to ZZZs of Sleep

Before the 1950s, most scientists thought of sleep as a passive part of our lives, but we now know that neurotransmitters in our brains are active as we pass through the five stages of sleep. "We went from thinking about sleep as a time out, to understanding that it's a very complex part of life," says Dr. Dement, who co-founded the world's first sleep clinic in 1970 at Stanford University and has researched sleep since 1952. "Before, sleep was like a car in the garage with the ignition off. Now we know sleep is like a car with the motor racing and the clutch engaged," he says.

Sleep specialists say we need to think of our sleep ritual as part of daily grooming, like brushing our teeth. "Good sleep hygiene is to establish a normal routine for bedtime so it isn't hit or miss every night," says Dr. Stuart Menn, medical director of Pacific Sleep Medicine Services in Palm Springs, and who is also board-certified in sleep disorders. "It's important to have a pattern, particularly during the work or school week. The amount of sleep we need seems to be wired in early in one's life," he says. "Most folks need 7—8 ½ hours of sleep, and 95 percent of the population falls within this

required range."

But many of us don't allow ourselves enough time in bed to get in enough sleep time. A recent National Sleep Foundation report says that Americans sleep, on average, only 6.9 hours a night.

Sleep Saboteurs

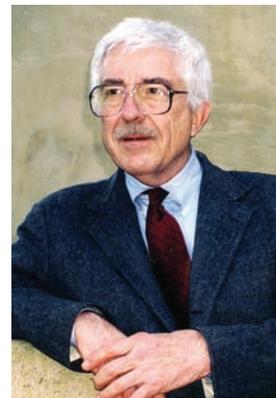
We know caffeine, alcohol and nicotine are common culprits that can upset our brains' balance and disrupt our ability to have a good night's sleep, but the list of sleep interrupters is far longer. A recent Consumer Reports survey, for example, showed that nearly 60 percent of adults polled said they suffered from chronic pain, like back or neck pain, and that it interrupted their sleep. Add to that high stress levels about family or financial problems, and millions of us spend our nights tossing and turning rather than snoozing.

So what questions should you ask your physician if you aren't sleeping well? Here's a list, particularly if you're a woman:

- Is sleeplessness a side effect of my medication for: colds, allergies, high blood pressure, depression, asthma, heart disease or pain?
- Should I be tested for thyroid disease? More than 10 million American women have undiagnosed thyroid disease that can disturb sleep.
- Have I begun perimenopause/menopause with a decline in my estrogen levels?

Dr. Dement says sleep disorders are often overlooked by health care professionals because very little time is spent on the topic of sleep in medical schools. He is adamant about changing that. "You're not healthy unless your sleep is healthy," says Dement. According to him, the failure of primary care physicians to ask their patients some simple questions allows millions of us to remain undiagnosed and untreated for sleep disorders.

One question, for example—"Do you have creepy, crawly



William Dement, MD, PhD

feelings in your legs when you're sitting quietly that go away when you walk around?"—could give doctors information needed to diagnose restless leg syndrome and treat potential causes, like anemia, diabetes or Parkinson's disease. So if you're not sleeping, speak up, then ask your physician, "Why?"

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—Dr. Stuart Menn

Sleep Tests and Treatments

One complaint that prompts many folks to seek help from a doctor is excessive daytime sleepiness, which is often coupled with a bed partner's complaints about the patient's snoring. These patients may then be referred from their primary physician to a sleep lab or center for a comprehensive polysomnogram to diagnose or rule out obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), according to Dr. Ronald Sneider, medical director

of the Sleep Laboratory at Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage.

The incidence of OSA in this country is startling: "Twenty-four percent of adult males and nine percent of adult females who are 18 or older have seven or more incidents of sleep apnea in an hour," says Dr. Dement.

Additionally, Merck Manual statistics note that OSA is more common in people who are overweight.

The patient usually comes into the sleep lab about 8 p.m. and watches a video explaining the test," says Dr. Sneider. "Then they are wired with scalp electrodes, which are painless, their airflow and oxygen saturation are measured and limb movement is monitored as they sleep.

Dr. Menn says that, in addition to excessive daytime sleepiness, most people who come to a sleep clinic have these chief complaints: 1. insomnia, either they're unable to fall asleep or can't stay asleep all night; 2. they experience parasomnias, like sleepwalking, or REM behavior disorder, where they act out their dreams; 3. their disorders are related to the circadian rhythm, like jet lag or shift work disorders.

Can a sleep test be done in a patient's home? "Yes, and the main advantage of home tests is to speed up the process and determine who needs further intervention," says Eisenhower's Dr. Sneider. "Ideally, primary care physicians would order home screens to determine who needs to see a sleep specialist."

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Dr. Menn notes that this month, Medicare may accept the results of portable home testing for obtaining a C-Pap unit, which treats OSA, on a 90-day trial basis if two conditions are met: 1. The home study is preceded by a history and physical exam and followed-up by a visit with the prescribing physician; and 2. the home study is read by a “qualified” physician whose expertise is sleep disorders medicine.

Can I just pop a pill?

As many as one in five Americans do take over-the-counter or prescription sleep aids, but the experts agree that the “why” needs to be determined by a physician before treatment. The underlying cause of sleeplessness may be as simple as deficient vitamin levels to something as serious as undiagnosed diabetes.

“With anyone who is sleep-disturbed where it’s having a daytime impact, there’s an indication for short-term drug therapy,” says Dr. Dement. However, the FDA also requires prescription sleeping pill manufacturers to warn patients about the potential side effects of sleepwalking, sleep driving and sleep eating with these drugs.

Additionally, some over-the-counter treatments like antihistamines or supplements, and herbs like melatonin or valerian, help some people get a good night’s sleep, while other products may have serious side effects, says Dr. Sneider. “Kava kava has been linked with liver abnormalities, so patients should not take any of these sleep aids without discussing them first with their physicians,” he says.

Get out of (sleep) debt

If after a long, stress-filled day we can think of putting ourselves in a “rest and digest” state vs. “fight or flight” mode, we can start paying off our sleep debt. Once you’ve ruled out any serious underlying causes, but still need a nudge to nod off, try some of these tips:

- Relax before bedtime with deep breathing, writing about your day in a journal to let go of troubled feelings or to give gratitude to good ones, taking a warm shower or bath, or doing



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yoga poses like supported child's or supported reclining cobbler's that calm the autonomic nervous system.

- Establish good sleep hygiene with a cool, dark bedroom without television noise, or children and pets crowding you to the edge of the mattress.
- Sound machines that mimic a gentle breeze or the soft whoosh of waves lapping at a beach helped a majority of people who used them to go to sleep, according to a Consumer Reports survey, and were almost as effective as prescription drugs as a sleep aid. Cost of the machines range from \$20 to over \$100.
- A simple mouth guard from the dentist may minimize or eliminate snoring and allow for easier breathing and a better quality of sleep.
- Check your mattress, and if it's 8–10 years old, you may need to replace it for ultimate comfort. Is a \$1,000 mattress as sleep-inducing as the \$20,000 one that the Queen of England sleeps on? Let your lumbar spine and budget be the judge.

Finally, before you doze off...

If you think you have a sleep problem, take a sleep quiz at sleepquest.com to find out. The fix may be as simple as a one-time consultation with a sleep physician. "Not all sleep disorders and complaints require an overnight sleep study," says Dr. Menn.

And, in the words of sleep guru Dement, remember: "The brain never sleeps, but we must." 

Linda Meierhoffer sleeps like a queen on her custom-designed, pillowtop mattress that came without the royal price tag.

RESOURCES

American Sleep Association
sleepassociation.org

National Sleep Foundation
sleepfoundation.org

Pacific Sleep Medicine Services

555 E. Tachevah Dr.,
Ste. 2E-202
Palm Springs, CA 92262
760-416-3505

Sleep Laboratory at Eisenhower Medical Center
39000 Bob Hope Drive,
Kiewit Bldg., Ste. 214
Rancho Mirage, CA 92270
760-346-7336



Books:

The Promise of Sleep,
by Dr. William Dement

Desperately Seeking Snoozin'
by John Weidman, a professional insomniac who writes for other insomniacs

Yoga poses
yoga.about.com



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