

I have heard it said that almost 100 million Americans do not routinely get a good night's sleep. Can you explain what causes insomnia and some suggestions as to what to do about it?

It is true that somewhere between 25 and 50% of Americans do not get adequate sleep. Many of these individuals simply not allocate enough time for sleep and it has been well proven that physiologically that all of us should get at least 8 hours or a bit more of sleep per day. In any questionnaire about sleep, most people respond they get somewhere around 7 hours or less. It is also true that some very highly functioning individuals, Einstein perhaps being the most famous, got by on as little as two or 3 hours a night and felt that they were simply wasting time by going to bed. Physiologists now might ask themselves imagine what accomplishments they could have done having gotten adequate sleep.

Sleep disorders do account however, for a great number of us who are not sleeping adequately. Insomnia is a common disorder and is often caused by anxiety or medications one is taking. Furthermore insomnia may be a primary disorder and not the result of sleep apnea or any major pathologic problem. Unfortunately, people who have insomnia often try numerous remedies and may indeed spend a lifetime trying to find the answer for getting adequate sleep. Some very simple things like establishing quietude in the room, allowing no light in the room, avoiding all stimulants in meals prior to going to bed, help these people a great deal. One can only see the number of advertisements on TV to understand how many of these individuals take some sort of sleep remedy.

There are other individuals who have a sleep disorder known as sleep apnea. Sleep apnea is defined as inadequate sleeping pattern caused by irregular respirations and slowing of the breathing pattern causing the individual to wake up briefly, take a deep breath and go back to sleep, only for the cycle to recur. For these people, they never do establish a proper sleep pattern, therefore they are chronically tired and may have trouble falling asleep during the day, may be inattentive at their job and may perform very poorly with mental functions as well. Snoring is a commonly described by their spouses. They are often overweight and have high blood pressure or heart conditions which co-exist and put them at risk for heart attack, stroke and sudden death. Recently a great deal of emphasis has been placed on this disorder following the death of pro-football Hall of Famer, Reggie White. We now realize that sleep apnea is truly a dangerous problem and one that can have a tremendous negative impact on one's quality of life as well as pose the risk of heart attack, sudden death, stroke and heart arrhythmia.

Many people with sleep apnea are very overweight and treating this condition by weight loss is helpful. We are fortunate however, that using breathing support systems such as C-pap or Bi-pap machines can make an immediate impact in their quality of life and also reduce the risk of cardiovascular death. Rarely, but in some instances an operation to enlarge the breathing area in the back of the throat may be a benefit.

All of us would like to sleep like a baby and get at least 8 to 10 hours of sleep a day and that would certainly be desirable. The important thing we should know is that when you feel you are not sleeping well or you are not sleeping enough or if fatigue is a common problem, you should visit with your doctor and raise the question of a sleep disorder and have it treated aggressively. Of course, following the rules of good health, including maintaining a normal body weight, good exercise, a healthy diet, normal blood pressure and finding some time to relax will have a great impact on whether you ever develop this disease.