

# WHY CANT WE GET ENOUGH REST?



By Doctor Pratap Saraf

It is nearly midnight and once again Sarah is lying in her bed, staring at the ceiling and wishing she could just fall asleep. For Sarah it's another long night of battling to get some rest before the next day's mad rush starts. Unfortunately, she's not alone – tonight millions of Americans will get less sleep than their bodies and minds need.

Whether the cause is stress, personal habits or work schedules, we're becoming a nation of sleep-deprived insomniacs. Research suggests that there may be as many as 70 million problem sleepers across the country tossing and turning in their beds. The average American now logs just seven hours sleep a night, which is about an hour and a half less sleep than people did 100 years ago.

## GROWING 'SLEEP DEBT'

Most adults need about 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night, or enough to feel alert throughout the day. Many suffer from one of the most typical sleep problems: stress.

Whether caused by work-related issues, family problems or other factors, stress is the most common problem related to sleeplessness. Good ways to manage stress include getting some exercise during the day and dealing with problems as they occur rather than putting them off. For many, an effective strategy is to take a few minutes before bedtime to write down the items that are causing worry. Then, at the bottom of the page, they list what can be done about each of their concerns.

Putting forth an effort to get the proper amount of sleep is important because each night of inadequate rest goes toward building up what sleep researchers call a sleep debt., a deficit in the amount of rest we need that can result in significant health risks. In fact, there is a growing body of evidence that untreated sleep problems can increase the risk of developing high blood pressure, coronary-artery disease, heart failure and stroke. Lack of sleep may play a role in developing diabetes and obesity.

What are the main causes of insomnia and sleep deprivation? Sleeplessness can be caused by many factors. Here are the most common:

**Stress** – Worries and concerns can take over you entire thought process.

**Drinking alcohol before bedtime** – Alcoholic drinks may seem to make you sleepy, however the effects of alcohol can be disruptive to sleep patterns once you've fallen asleep.

**Smoking before bedtime** – Smoking stimulates the nervous system.

**Drinking excessive amounts of coffee** – Also a powerful mind/body stimulant.

**Expecting to have difficulty sleeping and worrying about it** – Concern about not being able to fall asleep can become a self-fulfilling prophecy!

**A noisy environment** – Is someone in your home staying up late watching TV while you try to sleep? You may live in a building with noisy neighbors or located close to an airport or train tracks.

**Poor sleep hygiene** – Irregular sleep habits, retiring after midnight, reading or watching television in bed all contribute to poor sleep habits.

### **IMPACT ON SOCIETY**

It is estimated that 65 percent of the adult population in the US suffers from some degree of sleep deprivation. When one is deprived of the proper amount of sleep, he or she thinks and moves more slowly, makes more mistakes and has more difficulty remembering things. The result? Lower job productivity and an increase in accidents on the road and in the workplace. The financial loss to U.S. businesses from lost productivity has been estimated to be \$18 billion a year.

Lack of sleep is associated with irritability, impatience and even anxiety and depression. The effects can cause strain in social and family relationships.

### **SERIOUS HEALTH RISK**

By age 50, snoring affects half of all men over 50 and a quarter of all women. The numbers of people affected are expected to increase as baby boomers age. Simple snoring can be unpleasant enough for bed partners, but when chronic snoring becomes more severe it can lead to the dangerous condition known as obstructive sleep apnea.

During sleep, the muscles tend to relax. In most people this normal process causes no problems. In the case of obstructive sleep apnea, the person's throat muscles relax excessively which reduces or blocks the flow of air to the lungs. In other people, muscles may relax to a normal degree but due to a narrow throat passage, partial or total obstruction of the airway occurs.

The disorder usually begins with intense snoring progressing with apnea, which can cause a person to literally stop breathing for a few seconds, dozens or even hundreds of times each night. During these episodes, the brain detects lower oxygen levels because of the pause in breathing and jerks the person awake. The constant cycle of falling back to sleep to be abruptly wakened again, as often as once a minute, can send the heart rate soaring. Sleep apnea is a risk factor for developing cardiovascular disease, an enlarged heart and can even result in death.

### **THE SYMPTOMS**

While you are awake you may experience excessive day-time fatigue and sleepiness, rapid weight gain, complaints of insomnia or lack of sleep, confusion or brief memory loss upon awakening, unexplained morning headache or high blood pressure.

### **THE SLEEP STUDY**

Sleep apnea can be treated in a variety of ways including medication, surgery or the use of breathing appliances or dental devices. However, a routine medical examination cannot reveal the main symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea because the person's respiration

remains normal while awake. A sleep study may be required to diagnose the symptoms and causes of a person's sleep problems.

The study is usually scheduled at a hospital or private sleep study center, where the patient will spend the night. In order to monitor the patient's sleep, a technician will apply various sensors to the patient's head, face, chest and legs. These sensors will enable the technician to monitor breathing patterns, oxygen levels and sleep stages during the night to determine if the patient's sleep is being disturbed. The wires from these sensors are plugged into an amplifier that transmits them to a computer that is monitored by the technician. The readings are taken throughout the night and recorded, providing useful data on heart rate, brain wave activity, breathing effort, body position, snoring and other factors that affect sleep patterns.

The information gained from the sleep study is used by the physician to plan a course of treatment for each patient. The goal is to help each individual achieve one of life's most basic needs: a good night's rest.