

Sleep & Medications

Getting a good night's sleep is a problem for older adults. Dr. Jill Studley a gerontologist at Baylor University Medical Center at Dallas reports, "Probably 50 percent of older adults complain of sleep related problems." The National Institutes of Health says more than 70 million people nationwide may be affected by sleep troubles – and the total is expected to grow every year as the Baby Boomers advance in age." Millions of seniors ask their physicians for sedatives or sleeping pills or get over-the-counter pills without realizing the dangers of taking these medications. Studley reports that research shows these drugs are twice as likely to cause an accident as they are to help you sleep. Sleeping medications (prescribed and over-the-counter) can cause side effects including dizziness, loss of balance, falls and disorientation. These side effects are intensified in those with other conditions such as poor eyesight, high blood pressure and balance disorders. Dr. William Dement, director of the sleep disorders clinic at Stanford University said there is no medical justification for the *chronic use* of sleeping pills. He said that he usually prescribes them for "one or two nights, and rarely more than 10 nights."

Sleep researchers report that many seniors demand the pills for longer use because they don't sleep well (or because they are dependent or addicted to them). Dr. Westbrook, director of the Sleep Disorders Center at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, said, "(The elderly) tend to lose very deep sleep, their sleep is fragmented, and they have a lot more arousals during the night." Unfortunately, sleeping medications tend to deprive people of the deep sleep which already is a problem for the elderly. Dr. Gene Cohen, of the National Institute of Aging, said that sleeping pills "are treating the symptom, not the cause of insomnia." The causes of insomnia range from urinary urgency caused by prostate problems or diuretic medication to drinking coffee or alcohol in the evening to anxiety and depression.

Instead of turning to risky medications, here are some measures you can take to promote sleep: exercise during the daytime; avoid stimulants (such as caffeine), alcohol and spicy foods for 3 – 4 hours before bedtime; establish a regular bedtime routine; do not take naps during the day; and take a light bedtime snack – warm milk and cookies seems to work well. If these changes do not help, talk with your physician about the cause of your sleeping problem before trying over-the-counter medications.