

Need more sleep? You must be dreaming

However long we sleep, we're probably never satisfied. For some of us getting to sleep and/or staying asleep is a major problem and as a consequence we're dozey and drowsy all day. For others, sleep appears to be just an inconvenient impediment to being able to complete the necessary activities of the day.

According to researchers Derk-Jan Dijk and Raphaele Winsky-Sommerer from the University of Surrey in Guildford, UK, writing in the *New Scientist* magazine last year, the way we sleep has changed enormously over the past century. It's not just the desire to watch sporting events in different time zones that has all altered our traditional sleeping habits, it's also computers, late-night television, shift work and even light bulbs – with huge implications for our health.

Sleep deprivation can have serious adverse health effects – both physical and mental. Feeling fatigued, irritable, anxious or depressed can all result from too little sleep. The brain works harder but operates less effectively. The ability to undertake usual tasks requiring concentration (such as driving) is greatly impaired.

Sleep was again the subject of a special report in *New Scientist* magazine earlier this month. As the article explains “your nightly eight hours are not a single undifferentiated lump, but instead multiple stages of four cycles” with each cycle of roughly 90 minutes repeated five or six times.

Now researchers are investigating ways to squeeze a full, restful and recuperative night's sleep into fewer hours so we could cram more activity into the greater number of hours when we're awake – and all this using technology rather than medicines.

Meanwhile the so-called hypnotics and sedatives certainly have a place in treating insomnia – where insomnia is defined as more than very occasional sleep disturbance. Nevertheless, these medicines are best taken for the short term only. It seems likely a habit forming tolerance will develop when continued use exceeds a few weeks.

If you have chronic, (that is long term), sleep problems, there may be some simple ways you can get into a regular sleep pattern more easily. The newly revised Fact Card entitled *Sleeping Problems* gives some valuable tips. This card is available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information.

It's most important to establish a routine. Try to get up out of bed at the same time every day; and once you're up, stay up. It helps your body maintain that natural waking and sleeping rhythm that makes sleep easier.

Avoid caffeine-containing drinks (tea, coffee, cola, chocolate) in the evening. As well as being a mild stimulant, caffeine also causes us to pass water more often; so our sleep can be disturbed by the need to visit the bathroom during the night. If you can't go without your tea or coffee at night, try the 'decaf' varieties.

We should be aware that night caps are for keeping the head warm. The alcoholic varieties really don't do anything for normalising our sleep pattern. Alcohol can actually disturb the balance between the various stages of sleep and we tend to wake up still a little hung over. And just like coffee, alcohol can also encourage those extra trips to the bathroom.

As well, some prescription and over-the-counter medicines can disturb your sleep. Ask your pharmacist for advice about the possibility of this occurring. If you need a cold and flu remedy the so-called day-time/night-time formulas are worth considering.

Remember that persistent sleep disorders, especially those involving pain or breathing difficulties need to be investigated by your doctor.

And, for the nearest location of your Self Care pharmacy to pick up your *Sleeping Problems* fact card, phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or visit the website: www.psa.org.au and first click on “Self Care” then “Use the Self Care Pharmacy Finder”