In search of a good night’s sleep?

Contributed by Janetta Rains, PhD, Clinical Director, Elliot Center for Sleep Evaluation

It is a common myth that the need for sleep declines with age. In fact, research shows that our sleep needs remain fairly constant throughout adulthood. What does change is the ability to sleep. As with other physical functions, sleep controlling mechanisms of the body weaken over time. This makes sleep more vulnerable. However, normal age-related physical changes should not prevent one from obtaining sufficient sleep at night and feeling alert throughout the day. Healthy and active individuals can maintain sufficient sleep even into their 80s and 90s. Rather than normal aging, significant sleep problems in the elderly usually come from illness, medications, and lifestyle changes.

Normal physical changes in brain and sleep-regulating hormones occur naturally over time. This causes elders to spend less time in “deep sleep” and wake more easily. The body clock “advances” so that elders tend to get sleepy earlier in the evening and wake up in the early hours of the morning (unable to get back to sleep).

Medical illness tends to increase over the years. Older individuals often manage several chronic medical conditions that can disturb sleep. Pain, digestive, urinary and heart problems are common. Illnesses can lighten or interrupt sleep.

Emotional changes including the number and types of stresses confronting us increase over the years. This leads to a higher incidence of depression and anxiety. Emotional upset is the enemy of restful sleep.

Lifestyle changes are inevitable. Individuals retire and there are fewer schedules and demands to keep our minds and bodies active and in a good sleep/wake routine. We may love freedom and flexibility, but our bodies function best in highly regular schedules and routines.

Sleep disorders are more prevalent in the elderly than any other segment of the population. The “BIG 4” sleep disorders in the elderly are: sleep apnea (snoring with pauses in breathing), restless legs, insomnia, and advanced body clock.

There is much one can do to preserve sleep as one ages. Guard your health. Take only medications carefully reviewed with your healthcare provider. Maintain an active healthy lifestyle and schedule. Practice good sleep habits. And speak to your doctor about sleep problems or daytime sleepiness that do not respond to efforts to improve your schedule and habits.

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GOOD SLEEP HABITS
- Go to sleep and rise the same time every day
- Exercise moderately in the afternoon
- Avoid naps during the day
- Avoid caffeine, especially after lunch
- Avoid alcohol
- Don’t smoke
- Create a safe and comfortable place to sleep
- Bedroom should be dark, cool, and comfortable
- Use the bedroom only for sleeping (not alerting activities like television, computer or eating)
- Try not to worry about sleep
- Find out if prescription medications keep you from sleeping, and if so, talk with your doctor about changing prescriptions.

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It is not the need for sleep, but the ability to sleep that declines with age.