

HEALTHY LIVING

Good morning, America?

Lifestyle may account for sleeplessness

BY HELENA OLIVIERO

Cox News Service

Ella Walker has tried everything to get a good night's rest.

She bought a new pillow-top bed, stopped drinking Coke and booted the TV from the bedroom. She eventually dabbled in sleeping pills.

Nothing offered respite.

Over the past year, the bleary-eyed woman in her 50s hasn't be able to break a vicious sleep cycle that forced her to get by on just two or three hours of sleep a night.

Toting a toothbrush and a magazine, Walker recently checked herself into a sleep lab at DeKalb Medical Center in Decatur, Ga., desperate for answers, treatment and — above everything else — some zzzs.

"I'll do anything," she said, eyes droopy and barely awake.

After slipping into purple flannel pajamas, she lumbered into Room 4 at the lab.

The room looks very much like a hotel room (without the TV), with a queen-size bed, fluffy pillows, temperature controls, khaki walls and a stack of magazines — all designed to induce sleep. Walker, with almost 20 wires attached to her, crawled into bed and fell asleep.

But sleep didn't last long.

Walker is one of the estimated 50 million to 70 million Americans suffering from a sleep disorder — a condition making Americans not just drowsy but also fatigued, irritated and anxious.

Experts blame a mix of on-the-go lifestyles and bad habits — Starbucks, midnight snacks and late-night TV — for growing sleep woes.

And when it's time for bed, doctors say bodies don't always shut down when we turn off the lights.

Insomnia is often linked to depression, fatigue and poor eating habits, and doctors say

too many people shirk sleep as some kind of luxury instead of an essential activity.

"We have a 'too-many-balls-in-the-air' lifestyle" said Dr. Michael Lacey, director of the Northside Hospital Sleep Disorder Center in Atlanta.

"People try to get by on five hours of sleep when they really need six or seven. And then people try to make it up on the weekend, and it doesn't work that way."

Dr. Joseph Weissman, a neurologist at DeKalb Medical Center, said the personality characteristics of insomniacs sometimes serve a person well at work but don't translate well in bed.

"It may be helpful at work to be a bit obsessive," Weissman said. "But then they may be hyper alert and their mind is abuzz with too many things, and then they obsess about not sleeping."

It's normal for people occasionally to have trouble sleeping. Big stresses like a divorce or losing a job can interfere with anyone's sleep.

But while most people snap back into regular, continuous sleep, others struggle. Doctors say a pattern of not being able to sleep three or more days a week requires a visit to the doctor.

How many zzzs?

So just how much sleep does someone need?



PHOTO BY ALLEN SULLIVAN / COX NEWS SERVICE

Sleep technician Reuben James (right) prepares Ella Walker for monitoring at the Sleep Disorders Center at DeKalb Medical Center in Decatur, Ga. Even though she's exhausted, Walker manages to sleep only two or three hours a night.

On average, people need about 7 1/2 hours of sleep to feel refreshed. For some, five hours is enough. Others don't feel right unless they get nine hours of sleep, according to doctors.

The best way to induce sleep is to establish a good routine that doctors call "good sleep hygiene," which includes several variables from a comfy bed to a one-hour "wind-down period."

During this wind-down period, doctors suggest soothing activities such as reading or listening to classical music. And your bed, they say, should be used for sleep and sex — not for writing bills or hashing out a work proposal.

If you do find yourself tossing and turning, avoid turning on the TV or flicking on the computer because they are actually stimulating.

Self-medicating not best

Many doctors also frown on medications to induce slumber and say they often mask underlying problems such as depression or other health issues such as heart conditions or sleep apnea.

Lacey, the Sleep Disorder Center doctor, said most people with sleep troubles try to fix the problem by self-medicating with over-the-counter sleep aids or alcohol. But it's a dangerous cycle, he warns.

"Most of these medications are not very well-suited for the problem because they stay in the system too long and make you feel groggy. You are bludgeoning yourself to sleep, and this is not to anyone's long-term health interest," Lacey said. "It needs to be delved into and see what's behind it."

In many cases, patients battling for sleep suffer from sleep apnea, depression or anxiety — all of which typically need medical or psychological intervention.

Sleep apnea a cause

Back at the sleep lab at DeKalb Medical, Walker is undergoing a sleep study known as a polysomnogram, tracking her eye movement, air flow and brain activity.

After four hours of sleep, she jolts awake and can't slip back into sleep.

She's at her wit's end, increasingly frustrated with every toss and turn.

Working has become increasingly difficult, and she finds herself napping in her car. And even though her body is overwhelmed by exhaustion, she still finds herself up worrying at night.

Valerie Reid, director of DeKalb's sleep lab, later said Walker suffers from sleep apnea.

Walker says she is glad to know the reason behind her insomnia, and she's looking forward to weighing the treatment options.

Above everything, she's looking forward to a refreshing night's sleep. ■

Disruptive sleep patterns can be bad for your health

BY CAROLYN SUSMAN

Cox News Service

I can't sleep. How often have we said or heard that lament?

We can't fall asleep; we can't stay asleep.

Sleep is so basic a function that we tend to obsess over not getting enough.

And with studies warning that lack of sleep can lead to anything from weight problems to heart disease, the harrumph of the snorer and the drone of the guy counting sheep no longer seem funny.

Despite our best efforts to cuddle in the arms of Morpheus, insomnia plagues many of us on occasion.

That contributes to the popularity of over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol PM and supplements like melatonin.

Insomnia is a condition characterized by difficulty falling asleep, problems staying asleep, waking prematurely or feeling that the sleep was non-restorative.

The National Institutes of Health reports that about a third of us complain of sleep problems, and about 10 percent say we can't function well during the day because of sleep disruption.

That percentage is even higher in a poll released by the National Sleep Foundation, which found in a random sampling of about 1,500 adults that about half complained of daytime sleepiness.

Sleep problems can be transitory, writes Michael Krugman, author of "The Insomnia Solution" (\$13.95, Warner Books).

That type of sleeplessness usually results from stress. Did I mail the car payment? Did I tell Bobby's teacher he won't be in school? What if I get fired?

"Falling asleep involves a decrease in metabolism and a gradual cessation of readiness for action," writes Krugman, "whereas the stress response involves a rapid increase in metabolism, sending the organism into a state of preparedness for action."

It's obvious, he points out, that these are antagonistic processes; the one fights the other, disrupting our chances for sleep.

And people who suffer this way are those he targets in his book, although he invites anyone to practice his "drug-free way to a good night's sleep."

Such methods to induce good sleep appeal to Kerting Baldwin, who has suffered from insomnia for nearly a decade. The mother of two youngsters thinks her sleeplessness is related to her busy lifestyle: running a household and having a full-time job.

"Sometimes I wake up at 3 a.m. and can't go back to sleep. I toss and turn thinking of all the different assignments I need to do at work

... so I lay there worrying about these mundane things and can't go to sleep," she says.

She hasn't seen a doctor, she says, but has cut back on her caffeine — a known sleep disrupter — especially after 3 p.m., and is seeking to increase her daytime exercise.

She doesn't blame any physical or mental illness, such as depression, for her hectic sleep schedule, but doctors advise that if insomnia continues for more than a week to seek medical care.

Sleeplessness may be unrelated to the stress that knocks us out of bed for a night or two.

Most cases of insomnia, according to the National Institutes of Health, are linked with conditions such as psychiatric diseases — particularly depression — cardiopulmonary disorders and other conditions that may disrupt sleep.

And disruptive sleep patterns can be bad for your health. Sleep apnea, where a sleeper holds his or her breath and suddenly gasps loudly for air, is linked to heart disease and blood pressure problems, for example.

Five years ago, National Football League legend Reggie White's sudden death was attributed in part to sleep apnea. With this condition, the pauses in breathing during sleep are brief and usually last 10 to 30 seconds, but

an individual can cease breathing hundreds of times in one night.

Sleep apnea affects approximately 15 million to 20 million Americans, and a majority of individuals suffering from obstructive sleep apnea are undiagnosed and untreated, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

Because of the prevalence and seriousness of sleeping problems, sleep labs have been established around the country to identify and treat those with serious sleep problems.

"They are literally sleeping for as long as they can hold their breath," says Mark Pingolt, chief technologist of the Sleep Disorders Center at Martin Memorial Medical Center in Stuart, Fla.

"I've seen people with (breath-holding) two- and three-minute apneas that can be life-threatening."

Treatment ranges from weight loss to breathing machines to surgeries.

The bottom line is that sleeping problems no longer are, nor should they be, the punch line in jokes.

From dangerous daytime sleepiness, to disrupting bed partners, to being linked to life-altering conditions, insomnia can be serious.

"Sleep-challenged people are irritable, inattentive and accident-prone," says author Krugman.

"Fortunately, there is a brighter side. Sleep, when we get the right quantity and quality of it, is nature's best medicine." ■

