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Published by WellnessOne of Redding

Avoid This Before Bed if You Want a Good Night's Sleep

Reprinted from Mercola.com | August 23 2011

A recent study evaluated the effects of valerian extract taken nightly on the improvement of sleep quality in postmenopausal women. Somewhere around 50 percent of postmenopausal women experience sleep disturbances, such as insomnia.

Study participants consisted of 100 postmenopausal women who were experiencing insomnia. They were randomly divided into two groups, and received either 530 mg of concentrated valerian extract or a placebo twice a day for 4 weeks.



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According to the study, as reported by Green Med Info:

“A statistically significant change was reported in the quality of sleep of the intervention group in comparison with the placebo group ... Also, 30 percent of the participants in the intervention group and 4 percent in the placebo group showed an improvement in the quality of sleep ... Findings from this study add support to the reported effectiveness of valerian in the clinical management of insomnia.”

Sources:

- » [Menopause July 14, 2011](#)
- » [Green Med Info](#)

Dr. Mercola's Comments:

According to a 2010 [poll from the National Sleep Foundation](#) (NSF), about 60 percent of the US population suffers from poor or inadequate sleep. Prior to light bulbs, people slept an average of 10 hours a night. Nowadays, the average American gets less than seven hours of shut-eye during the week, and slightly more on weekends.

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While I don't believe there is a hard-and-fast rule as to [how long you must sleep](#), it is crucial to get enough to feel well-rested—something that can be nearly impossible if you're suffering from insomnia.

Lack of sleep can have far-reaching ramifications. In fact, you can have an excellent diet and exercise regimen, but if you're not sleeping well, optimal health will remain elusive. I've previously detailed the many [health hazards of lack of sleep](#), so for a refresher, please review the hyperlink provided.

It's important to understand that while herbs are far less problematic than [prescription sleep-aids](#), ultimately even these natural supplements are just symptomatic band-aids. If you're suffering from insomnia, you are far better off seeking to correct the problem at its root, which I'll discuss below. That said, let's first review a couple of natural remedies that may offer some temporary help.

Can Herbal Remedies Help Insomnia?

Valerian is one of the most commonly used sleep remedies for insomnia. Studies have found that valerian improves:

- Deep sleep
- Speed of falling asleep, and
- Overall quality of sleep



Bear in mind however, that herbs can affect people differently, and about 10 percent of people who take valerian tend to actually feel *energized* by it, which may keep them awake...

In the [featured study](#) above, 30 percent of the post-menopausal women participating in this randomized, triple-blind, controlled trial showed an improvement in the quality of their sleep after taking 530 mg of valerian twice a day for four weeks. The authors concluded that:

"Valerian improves the quality of sleep in women with menopause who are experiencing insomnia. Findings from this study add support to the reported effectiveness of valerian in the clinical management of insomnia."

An earlier [study, published in 2001](#), also found that people who are regularly kept awake at night, plagued by thoughts of work deadlines, relationship problems or other stressful life events might find some relief in the herbs valerian and kava. In that study, adults who had suffered from stress-induced insomnia for over 15 years first received 120 mg daily of kava for 6 weeks. Then, after two weeks off treatment, they received 600 mg of valerian daily for another 6 weeks.

Overall, the participants reported that both herbs significantly relieved their overall symptoms of stress and insomnia, and while the majority, 58 percent, reported no side effects from either treatment, some did experience side effects.

- 16 percent reported vivid dreams after taking valerian, and
- 12 percent experienced dizziness with kava

Melatonin—Another Helpful Option

I personally believe that melatonin is one of the best options available, as far as supplemental sleep aids are concerned. Melatonin is a hormone produced by a pea-sized gland in the middle of your brain called the pineal gland, which is affected by light and dark. At night, when it gets dark, your pineal gland switches "on" and begins producing melatonin to be released into your blood, which makes you feel sleepy. When functioning normally, your melatonin levels will stay elevated for about 12 hours (usually between 9 pm and 9 am). Then, as the sun rises, your pineal gland turns "off" and the melatonin levels in your blood decrease.

The pineal gland's sensitivity to light and dark explains why *the use of light emitting [electronic gadgets should be avoided before going bed](#)*, and why something as simple as turning on a light in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom can interfere with your sleep for the rest of the night. Interestingly enough, studies have shown that when you're taking melatonin as a supplement, *lower* doses are more effective, so do not make the mistake of thinking that more is better.



The amount of melatonin you create and release every night varies depending on your age. Children usually have much higher levels of melatonin than adults, and your levels typically decrease with advancing age. Researchers believe this may explain why many older adults occasionally experience disrupted sleep patterns. Still, even melatonin is only a short-term solution. The best option if you regularly have trouble sleeping is to try to find out the root cause of your insomnia.

Understanding Why and How Insomnia Occurs

As explained by sleep expert [Dr. Rubin Naiman in a previous interview](#), insomnia is the most commonly reported sleep disorder. To understand *why* insomnia occurs, you need to understand that sleep is the outcome of an interaction between two variables: sleepiness, and what Dr. Naiman refers to as "noise."

Ideally and under normal conditions, your sleepiness should gradually increase throughout the day, peaking just before you go to bed at night. In order to get a good night's sleep, you want your sleepiness level to be high, and the noise level to be low. If "noise" is conceptually greater than your level of sleepiness, you will not fall asleep. "Noise" can be *any kind of stimulation* that inhibits or disrupts sleep, and is generally classified into three zones:

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1. **Mind**—The most common type is referred to as "cognitive popcorn;" unstoppable thoughts running through your mind at night.
2. **Body**—Such as physical pain, discomfort, indigestion, side effects from prescription drugs, or residual caffeine from drinking coffee too late in the day.
3. **Environmental**—Environmental noise is usually obvious, such as noises in your room or house, a snoring partner, music, lights, or a bedroom that's too warm.

More often than not, the reason why people can't fall asleep is *not* because of lack of sleepiness, but rather because of *excessive noise*. Therefore, the questions you need to ask yourself when you can't sleep is, "Where or what is the noise? Does it originate in my mind, my body, or my environment?" Typically, there are more than one form of noise disturbing your sleep and keeping you awake, so carefully evaluate your environment and inner/outer state to determine ALL the contributing factors, and make sure to address them all.

Two of the Most Common Problems that Contribute to Poor Sleep

As mentioned in the melatonin section above, even minute amounts of light can affect your ability to fall asleep and remain asleep, by interfering with your pineal gland's production of melatonin. In my experience, addressing these two factors is usually a great place to start for most people. Two factors that frequently prevent sound sleep are:



- Light
- Temperature

Ideally, you'll want to **turn off your TV, computer, iPad** and any other light emitting technologies *at least* an hour prior to bed time. Next, make sure your bedroom is shrouded in pitch darkness by covering your windows with blackout shades or heavy drapes. Also close your bedroom door, get rid of night-lights, and refrain from turning on any light during the night, even when getting up to go to the bathroom.

If you have to use a light, install so-called "low blue" light bulbs in your bedroom and bathroom. These emit an amber light that will not suppress melatonin production.

[The ideal temperature to promote sound sleep](#) is actually quite cool—between 60 to 68 degrees F (15.5 to 20 C), according to studies. Keeping your room cooler or hotter can lead to restless sleep. This is because when you sleep, your body's internal temperature drops to its lowest level, generally about four to six hours after you fall asleep. Scientists believe a cooler bedroom may therefore be most conducive to sleep, since it mimics your body's natural temperature drop.

Electromagnetic Fields Can Also Disrupt Your Sleep

Additionally, I recommend checking your bedroom for [electro-magnetic fields \(EMFs\)](#) as these too can disrupt your pineal gland's production of melatonin, and may have other negative effects as well. To do this, you need a gauss meter. You can find various models online, starting around \$50 to \$200. Some experts even recommend pulling your circuit breaker before bed to kill all power in your house.

At bare minimum, move alarm clocks and other electrical devices away from your head. If these devices must be used, keep them as far away from your bed as possible, preferably at least three feet. Also avoid keeping cell phones and portable phone bases on your night stand. Cell phone chargers should be kept at least four feet away from your bed, while portable phone bases and wireless routers should be kept as far away from your bedroom as possible. Avoid running electrical cords underneath your bed.

Unfortunately, none but a few communities in the US require that wiring in the walls be placed in metal-clad conduit. This is primarily done for fire prevention, but it also essentially eliminates the electric fields. Therefore, more than likely, you are exposed to electric fields that radiate from the wires in the wall at the head of your bed when you are sleeping. The solutions are to move your bed three feet away from the wall, or turn off the power circuit to your bedroom. To check for the presence of electric fields in the walls, you can purchase an inexpensive low voltage e-field detector. They are commonly available at most local electrical, electronic and hardware stores. A widely used e-field tester is the Non-contact Adjustable Voltage Detector, AC 5-1000V, [available from All-Spec Industries](#) and [ToolUp.com](#), as well as other online sources. This device will also allow you to check for the presence of electric field exposure throughout your home and workplace.



Last but not least, beware of what's on the other side of your bedroom wall, and under the floor. Avoid sleeping with your head against a wall that has electric meters, circuit breaker panels, televisions or stereos, for example, on the other side. All of these are source of magnetic fields that you should sleep at least four feet away from to limit dangerous exposure.

Avoid Sleeping Pills

In 2008, Americans filled more than [56 million prescriptions for sleeping pills](#) and spent more than [\\$600 million on over-the-counter sleep aids](#). However, according to a 2007 [analysis of sleeping pill studies](#) financed by the National Institutes of Health, sleeping pills like Ambien, Lunesta, and Sonata reduced the average time to go to sleep by less than *13 minutes* compared to a placebo, which can hardly be considered a worthwhile improvement.

Aside from being pathetically ineffective, sleeping pills also come with a slew of detrimental and potentially dangerous side effects.

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For starters, they're notorious for being addictive, which means that once you want to stop taking them, you'll likely suffer withdrawal symptoms that could be worse than your initial insomnia. Some sleeping pills may also become less effective when taken for longer than two weeks, which means you may find yourself needing ever higher dosages.

Other common side effects include weight gain, [sleep walking, and eating](#) in your sleep. You're also more apt to [get into a traffic accident](#) when using sleeping pills. (Ambien ranks among the top 10 drugs found in the bloodstreams of impaired drivers, according to some state toxicology labs.)

Most people do not realize that certain sleeping pills -- those containing Benadryl -- can have a half life of about *18 hours*. So, if you take them every night, you're basically sedated for a large portion of the day as well! Not surprisingly, they're associated with cognitive deficits in the morning.

Many sleeping pills are also a potent anti-cholinergics, which suppress REM sleep and dreaming. [These drugs are also known to increase dementia risk](#) in seniors. All in all, there are far better, safer and more effective ways to get a good night's sleep than resorting to potentially dangerous drugs.

Make sure to talk to your WellnessOne practitioner about his recommendations. The Metagenics MyoCalm PM is a good option to consider that is herb based, containing Valerian Root and other calming herbs.



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