

Insomnia, other disorders can adversely affect health



Ted Schurter/The State Journal-Register

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Here's something that might keep you awake at night. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, drowsy drivers account for more than 100,000 crashes each year, including more than 1,500 fatalities.

Of course, getting in a traffic accident is just one of the many negative consequences that can result from not getting a good night's sleep. And persistent worrying is just one of the many causes of insomnia. An interrupted sleep cycle can be a vicious cycle, one that can get worse as people get older.

“As a person ages, they're at risk of developing a number of different sleep disorders. The most common one is insomnia. And that can manifest itself in many ways. Some individuals may have problems falling asleep. Other people may have problems staying asleep in the middle of the night. And some people may wake earlier than desired,” said Dr. Jerry Reedy.

Reedy practices at Central Illinois Allergy and Respiratory Services, where he specializes in pulmonary disease and sleep disorders. He is also the medical director of St. John's Hospital Sleep Center.

Many factors can contribute to an elusive or aborted night's sleep. Medical conditions such as arthritis,

emphysema and heart ailments can affect sleep patterns, as can depression and anxiety. Lifestyle choices can also prove disruptive. Strenuous exercise or the consumption of alcohol or caffeine too close to bedtime are not recommended.

In addition to the increased possibility of an automobile accident, the fatigue and diminished alertness that result from a lack of sleep can diminish job performance, impair memory and cognitive abilities and affect a person's mood to the point that it could create tensions in personal relationships. These are just some of the effects that can occur in the short term.

“Long-term effects of insomnia are not as well understood, but there are concerns that it might actually trigger psychiatric conditions such as depression and may be related to the development of heart disease and obesity,” Reedy said.

Often, the most important first step in dealing with insomnia is recognizing the importance of sleep. People can grow accustomed to inadequate sleep, and not be fully aware of the negative effects.

“The good news is that often times, it's very transient and can usually be linked to something. Stress in our life. Problems at work. Personal conflict. That type of insomnia will typically resolve on its own without any intervention,” Reedy said.

About a third of all adults will experience a bout of insomnia in their lifetime and there are many ways to help combat sleeplessness.

In addition to avoiding caffeine, alcohol and strenuous activity before bedtime, people should create a quiet and comfortable atmosphere in their bedroom. Reading or watching TV in bed should also be avoided so that bedtime is associated exclusively with sleep.

“One of the things they want to avoid is lying awake in bed, because what happens is you condition the mind to associate being in bed with being awake. If you can't sleep, you should exit the bedroom,” Reedy said.

This advice is part of the cognitive behavioral therapy that Reedy recommends for treating insomnia. It is designed to help patients develop thoughts and behaviors that are more conducive to achieving sleep and to eliminate those that have a negative effect. Reedy believes that is the most beneficial treatment option and only recommends sleeping pills for certain patients, and then only as a short-term aid.

“Most of the over-the-counter medicines (contain) an antihistamine,” which does have some side effects, Reedy said. “So we usually do not advise using those medicines. For prescriptions, there are some of what we call non-hypnotic sleeping pills (Lunesta, Rozerem.) They have a pretty favorable side effect profile and work well.”

While insomnia is the most common sleep disorder, there are more serious conditions that may require medical treatment.

According to the World Health Organization, more than 100 million people throughout the world suffer from obstructive sleep apnea, a sleep disorder that causes breathing to be repeatedly disrupted for short periods of time when muscles fail to keep the airway open.

Men are twice as likely to develop sleep apnea. Other risk factors include advanced age, menopause, obesity and smoking. Daytime symptoms of sleep apnea include morning headaches and sore throats, fatigue and irritability — common ailments that may not lead the sufferer to suspect a breathing disorder.

“Many people with obstructive sleep apnea do not even know they have it. It’s often times first recognized by a spouse or a bed partner who might notice a pattern of snoring or shallow breathing,” Reedy said.

While sleep apnea can be diagnosed in people of any age, it is most common in those 30 to 60 years of age. Typically, a person’s primary care physician will recognize the symptoms and order a sleep study at an accredited clinic.

Patients arrive at the sleep clinic a half hour before their normal bedtime and stay overnight for testing. The staff monitors the patient’s breathing, heart rate, oxygen level and brain activity during sleep.

There are several treatment options for obstructed sleep apnea. Mild cases may be treated with oral appliances that open the airways. Surgery may be required for those who won’t tolerate other forms of treatment.

The most common treatment is a continuous positive airway pressure or CPAP device. Patients wear a mask over their nose or nose and mouth. The mask is connected to a blower that forces air into their airway.

H.B. Smith of Virginia wears a CPAP device every night.

“I used to be restless all night long. Or at least that’s what I was told. Now I put that machine on; I don’t move all night. I don’t even think I could sleep without it now,” he said.

Smith first underwent a sleep study several years back but came away skeptical of the diagnosis and prescribed treatment. A second study convinced him to try the CPAP.

“I wouldn’t have believed it, but it made a big a difference,” he said.