

# ABC's OF SLEEP MEDICATION

Not everyone sleeps well and wakes up feeling rested. For those who struggle with sleep, it can become a vicious cycle: you can't sleep - you worry about not getting enough sleep - and you can't fall asleep or fall back to sleep. If you have sleep problems, you're not alone. In fact, almost one in three people in Canada report difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or waking up too early from a light sleep (College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, 2005).



## Insomnia

Signs of insomnia include having trouble falling asleep or waking up before you're well-rested. Insomnia is not a disease – it's a health problem. When people have trouble sleeping, their bodies are telling them that something isn't right.

Insomnia could be related to a number of things such as:

- Having a lot of unmanaged stress.
- Trying to deal with a difficult life event.
- Consuming too much caffeine.
- Having trouble getting used to different hours of work.
- Being in pain.
- Struggling with mental health problems.
- Having breathing problems.
- Drinking alcohol. (Statistics Canada, 2005)

Sometimes insomnia can last a few days or weeks. Unfortunately, almost one in five Canadians have insomnia that lasts more than six months (College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, 2005). This can take a serious toll on your health. You could have trouble concentrating, remembering things, and doing daily tasks. You also increase your risk of being injured. Over time, insomnia can increase the risk of developing a weakened immune system, diabetes, depression, high blood pressure, and obesity (Healthy Ontario, 2009).

If you or someone you know is having sleep problems, be sure to get help. A health care professional (HCP), may suggest counselling, stress management, or sleep medication. All of these behaviours may increase your chances of getting a good night's sleep.

## Sleep Medication

Sleep medication is available over-the-counter (OTC) and by prescription. Both have their benefits and potential harms. Consider discussing the following ABC's with your HCP if you are thinking about taking sleep medication.

### **A**PPROPRIATE USE

If you decide to take sleep medication, it's very important to follow the directions as these medicines, if misused, can cause serious problems. Sleep medication works best when taken regularly and for no more than a few weeks at a time. Taking them over a longer period of time can lead to dependency. For example, if over time you need more of the sleep medication to fall asleep and stay asleep, or feel withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking the medication, you may have developed a dependency to the sleep medication.

It's also dangerous to suddenly stop taking sleep medication because that can lead to mild withdrawal symptoms (e.g., headaches, nightmares, and anxiety) or serious withdrawal symptoms like hallucinations and seizures (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2009). Reducing the dose over time with your HCP's help can reduce the risk for withdrawal symptoms. It's also dangerous to increase the dose of the sleep medication without direction from your HCP because it increases the risk of poisoning.

**"Sleep medication works best when taken regularly and for no more than a few weeks at a time".**

# BRAIN

Different kinds of sleep medications work in different ways, but they all affect the brain. Some sleep medications reduce restlessness, anxiety, and tension (e.g., benzodiazepine hypnotics and sedatives). They can help an individual relax and feel calm which often leads to sleep. Other types of sleep medications make you feel drowsy (e.g., non-benzodiazepine hypnotics and sedatives). Finally, some sleep medications (e.g., some antidepressants) treat depression, which may be the cause of insomnia for some people.



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR SAFETY

The following are safety tips for individuals taking sleep medications:

- Take sleep medication only when you are having a stressful event in your life that is seriously impacting your ability to sleep.
- Ask your HCP for the smallest dose that will likely help you sleep.
- Take sleep medication only for a short period of time. Check with your HCP to see how long you should take or continue to take sleep medication.
- Understand your medication. Talk to your HCP or a pharmacist to learn about your sleep medication. It's important to know how they work and what the side effects are.
- Don't share your sleep medication with anyone. If someone asks you to share your sleep medication, tell them to visit their HCP.
- To help prevent someone from stealing or accidentally taking your sleep medication, keep it in a locked container or cabinet.
- Don't drink alcohol while taking sleep medication. If you mix sleep medication with alcohol or other medications that slow the brain, the possibility of a serious injury or a fatal overdose.



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### Over-the-Counter Sleep Medication Fact

Just because over-the-counter (OTC) sleep medication is available without a prescription doesn't mean it's safe. Self-medicating with OTC sleep medications (e.g., antihistamines, antihistamines combined with pain medicine) can leave you drowsy and groggy, even after eight hours of sleep (FDA U.S., 2009). It's hard to feel rested and ready for the day if you're groggy from taking OTC sleep medication the night before.

### Natural Health Products and Sleep Fact

Natural health products like melatonin, valerian root, kava, and tryptophan are OTC sleep aid products used by some Canadians. However, these OTC sleep products can have health risks. They have side effects and can interact with other drugs (including other OTC drugs) or food. To reduce the risk of adverse reactions from OTC sleep products, keep your HCP informed about all the drugs you take (Health Canada, 2009). Adverse reactions are harmful effects that happen to an individual after using a health product. If you have an adverse reaction to a health product, it's very important to report it to your HCP.



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