

# Do Seniors Need Less Rest?

Sleep problems among the elderly are thought to be inevitable, but they could be a sign of a medical or lifestyle issue that can be fixed.

BY DIANA KELLY LEVEY

**WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT** seniors and sleep, does it call to mind a snoozing grandparent in a rocking chair? Portrayals of elderly folks in pop culture make it seem like a senior person can fall asleep anywhere; but if you've experienced worsening sleep quality as you've aged, you might be wondering why it's happening and if there's anyway to avoid it.

Solving sleep disturbances is important in aging populations in particular. Sleep problems among the elderly are associated with significant morbidity and mortality as well as increased risk for nursing-home placement, according to research.

"Sleep disturbance and sleep apnea are associated with many different conditions in the elderly," says Atul Malhotra, M.D.,

vice chief of research, pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine and director of sleep medicine at the UC San Diego School of Medicine.

The two most common culprits are sleep apnea and insomnia. Sleep apnea is a condition in which people stop breathing when they are asleep. Insomnia is a persistent problem in which people have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, explains Dr. Malhotra.

Both of these issues can have serious health consequences and aging is a risk factor for both.

There are lots of alternative therapies to help remedy sleep issues that don't involve machines or medications, says Dr. Malhotra. Talk to your doctor about the options that would be best for your sleep issues.

Here are five reasons seniors have problems getting their Z's—and some ways to fix them.

## **ISSUE** Breathing Problems

Older adults are more likely to suffer from lung diseases.

Pulmonary problems, such as pneumonia or chronic obstructive

## Medications That May Cause Sleep Disturbances

→ **Bronchodilators or nebulizers for COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)**

→ **Corticosteroids, such as prednisone, which can treat rashes, lupus and asthma**

→ **Painkillers, for example, opioids or narcotics, which may worsen sleep and sleep apnea**

→ **Diuretics to reduce fluid in patients with heart issues, which may cause you to get up to pee during the night**

pulmonary disease (COPD), can often lead to sleep problems in this demographic.

**The Fix:** There's good data suggesting that the majority of people can tolerate CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machines or masks for relief, if you're suffering from sleep apnea and lung problems. Snoring

**AGE-RELATED ISSUES INCLUDE FRAGMENTED SLEEP AND EARLY RISING WITH AN INABILITY TO FALL BACK ASLEEP.**

is not normal, so go talk to your doctor about it, suggests Dr. Malhotra.

## **ISSUE** Heart Disease

One study found that elderly people who reported excessive daytime sleepiness have a 49 percent relative risk increase of cardiovascular death (from cerebrovascular disease, myocardial infarction and heart failure), compared to those who do not.

**The Fix:** Ask your doctor if your blood pressure medications have side effects of sleeplessness and see if they can recommend an alternative. Go to bed only when you're sleepy, practice relaxation techniques and consider cognitive therapy.

## **ISSUE** Pain

Chronic pain is another reason anyone can experience trouble sleeping. In the elderly, pain tends to be more common and could be why they don't sleep well.

**The Fix:** If your pain is due to a chronic condition, like fibromyalgia or arthritis, that's keeping you awake, your doctor might prescribe medications that can ease discomfort and help you sleep. Exercise daily, try cognitive behavioral therapy and consider acupuncture.

## **ISSUE**

### Waking Up to Urinate

As you get older, your bladder changes, possibly causing you to wake and relieve yourself during the night. These issues could be due to weak bladder muscles, urinary incontinence, bladder leakage or prostate issues in men, according to the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

**The Fix:** If you wake up to urinate at night, examine your habits before bed and stop drinking two hours before turning in. If that doesn't help, discuss your issues with a physician, who might suggest pelvic floor exercises or lifestyle changes, like losing weight, to help.

## **ISSUE**

### Poor Sleep Schedules

Staying asleep is one of the most commonly reported problems among older people. Another issue is waking up too early and being unable to fall back asleep. Age-related sleep physiological changes can cause sleep issues, including an advanced sleep phase and decreased slow-wave sleep, which result in fragmented slumber as well as early rising.

**The Fix:** Research published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* found that using cognitive behavioral therapy techniques for insomnia and getting more light exposure during the day could help seniors who wake up early. Daily activity and maintaining a steady sleeping and waking schedule as well as getting exposure to light early in the day can help.

## The Link Between Alzheimer's Disease and Sleep Problems

There is thought to be some contribution of sleep apnea to the development of Alzheimer's disease, says Atul Malhotra, M.D. "We aren't entirely sure why. There may be genetic factors that underlie both conditions. It may be that the low oxygen levels and oxygen levels going low and then high and then low and then high could lead to oxidative stress [that] some people think may contribute to Alzheimer's."

"Disrupting sleep can impair memory formation," he adds. "There are potentially some links between sleep disruption and Alzheimer's, although we don't know for sure that treating sleep problems will prevent Alzheimer's."

The link between depression and Alzheimer's is a condition known as pseudodementia, in which people aren't actually demented; they are severely depressed, so they can appear to be demented—and that potentially is a link between sleep apnea, depression and Alzheimer's as well, says Dr. Malhotra.