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Ask the Pharmacist: Sleep

The National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine reports that between 50 and 70 million Americans struggle with chronic sleep problems,[1] and according to the United States Surgeon General, sleep deprivation and disorders cost the nation $15 billion in healthcare expenses.[2]

A lack of sleep can take a toll both psychologically and physically—from daytime sleepiness to a weakened immune system. Long-term sleep deprivation leads to problems that can include memory lapse, depression, irritability and impaired work performance.

To help win the battle over sleepless nights, many Americans are turning to medication. In 2005, 42 million prescriptions for sleeping pills were filled.[3] An analysis by Medco found that the number of adults aged 20 to 44 using sleep medications rose 128 percent between 2000 and 2005, and was up 114 percent among 10 to 19-year-olds in that same time period.[4]

Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder, affecting between 30 and 40 percent of adults within a given year. Other sleep disorders include sleep apnea—a temporary suspension of breathing that occurs throughout the night—and restless leg syndrome, which is characterized by intense discomfort, mostly felt in the legs when at rest. Some general recommendations for relieving sleep disorders are listed below. Should the problem persist, talk to a neurology specialist pharmacist at Medco by calling the number on the back of your prescription drug identification card.

A neurology specialist pharmacist has been trained specifically in the medications that treat sleep disorders, and he/she counsels patients every day who suffer from this chronic condition. Available 24/7, this specialist pharmacist will answer any questions you have about the medications you take for your sleep disorder and help you to manage this condition. Specialist pharmacists can also review your medical history and suggest ways you can save money on your prescriptions.

Here are some tips to help improve your sleep.

- **Keep to a regular sleep schedule.** Go to sleep and wake up at about the same time each day, even on weekends.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercising early in the day can reduce stress and help you fall asleep at night.
- **Watch what you eat and drink.** Avoid alcohol, caffeine and meals close to bedtime. A cup of warm milk though, can help make you sleepy.
- **Unplug.** This is particularly important for teens with sleep problems. Make sure the bedroom is free of computers, video games, TVs and phones.

Sleep problems can be symptomatic of a physical or psychological condition that requires treatment, so it's important to see your doctor if the problem persists. Depending on the underlying reason for sleep difficulty, your doctor may recommend behavioral therapy—alone or in combination with drug treatments—for more serious sleep disorders. Medications include both

over-the-counter products for minor sleep disturbances and prescription drugs, called hypnotics, for more serious sleep disorders.

Drug therapy is usually only recommended for short-term use. For those with chronic insomnia, a combination of medication and behavioral interventions is often more effective than either approach alone. Sometimes, with the right behavioral therapies, the use of drug treatment can be reduced or eliminated altogether.

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1 *Institute of Medicine of the National Academies*, "Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem." Available at: http://www.iom.edu/CMS/3740/23160/33668.aspx.
2 *National Institutes of Health*, "First National Sleep Conference March 29-30 Explores Sleep's Role in Public Health" press release from March 25, 2004. Available at: http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/new/press/04-03-25.htm.
3 *The New York Times*, "Record Sales of Sleeping Pills Are Causing Worries" by STEPHANIE SAUL, February 7, 2006 (Business Section). Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/07/business/07sleep.html.
4 *Medco Health Solutions*, "Sleep Deprivation Driving Drug Use and Cost: New Research Finds Increased Use of Prescription Sleeping Aids," press release from October 17, 2005. Available at: http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=131268&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=768110&highlight=.

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