

SUNDAY CONVERSATION

Trouble sleeping? Here are some tips

We all need sleep, but many of us have difficulty getting it for one reason or another. About one-third of adults suffer from insomnia, according to the National Institutes of Health. So instead of taking that nap, check out some of the sleep tips Dr.

Aparajitha Verma, a neurologist at the Methodist Neurological Institute's Sleep Disorders Center, shared with Houston Chronicle reporter Alexis Grant.

Q: Some parents give their children warm milk to help them fall asleep. Does that really work?

A: There are no documented studies. But the whole philosophy is that having a warm cup of milk or tea raises your body temperature a little bit, enough so it would help you fall asleep.

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Q: What time should I stop drinking coffee to allow myself to sleep well that night?

A: The general rule is (caffeine) stays (in your body) for five to seven hours. If you are taking a cup of coffee around 6 p.m. at work because you're trying to stay until 7, guess what — you can't fall asleep at 9 or 10.

Q: Is it safe to use over-the-counter sleep medicine every night?

A: I'm not a big fan of using hypnotics, like sleeping pills. There have been studies that showed that (certain OTC

sleep medicines), after four or five days of taking it every day, it loses its effect. After a while, you get dependent on it and you develop tolerance.

Q: Should adults avoid taking naps?

A: If you are very tired and you feel that the naps help, those are good. But anything more than 15- to 20-minute naps, (ask yourself) why you need to take those naps. Are you sleep-deprived? If you're taking long naps, multiple times of the day, you need to know why.

Q: What's your opinion of the snooze button?

A: It's not good because whatever sleep you're getting is very distracted, very interrupted. You wake up feeling more tired. If you are hitting the snooze button, that tells you that you are sleep-deprived. You need to change your lifestyle to go to bed early.

Q: How much sleep should the average adult get?

A: Seven to eight hours, on average, is a good night's sleep. Less than six hours has been shown to be clearly associated with obesity (and so has) more than nine hours.

Q: How long should it take an adult to fall asleep?

A: Anywhere from five to 15, to the max of 20 minutes. If you're in bed for 20 to 30 minutes or longer, turning, tossing in bed, you have a problem.

Q: What tips can you offer for getting a good night's sleep?

A: Try to stick to a standardized sleep schedule. Go to bed at the same time, try to wake up at the same time.

Have wind-down time. If your usual bedtime is 10:30, half an hour or so before that, try to do something that's nonstimulating. Read a book in another room.

Try not to do clock-watching. If you're always looking at the clock, I tell patients, set an alarm in the next room or turn your alarm around or put a blanket on it.

If you're in bed for 20 minutes or longer, if you're not able to fall asleep, I typically tell my patients to leave the room, go to another room, sit down somewhere quiet, and do something that's nonstimulating — whatever calms you down.

Use your bedroom only to sleep. No reading in bed, no eating in bed, no watching TV in bed. If you have computers or TVs in your bedroom, please take them out. You need to train your mind to associate bed with sleeping and nothing else.

Q: Is sleep apnea — when normal air flow is obstructed — the same as snoring?

A: There are people who can just have snoring without sleep apnea, but that's less likely in adults. If you snore or if you're obese and if you have daytime complaints — sleepy, tired during the day — there's a high chance that you have sleep apnea. The most common cause is obesity. Kids who have big tonsils and adenoids are also at risk.

It's no longer "Oh, my grandpa snores, my dad snores,



everybody snores. It's just a noise, and it doesn't bother me." Patients who have obstructive sleep apnea are at a higher risk of developing high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, heart attacks, strokes and sudden nocturnal death.

Q: What's the best way to get someone to stop snoring?

A: You have to go seek medical attention. There's no quick fix. All these breathe-easy and whatever strips and the pillows and mattresses might work, but there's no harm in making sure you don't have other symptoms (of apnea).

Q: What are the most common causes of insomnia?

A: Psychiatric conditions, followed by medical conditions. Psychiatric disorders that are associated with insomnia. The first one is anxiety disorder; the second is depression.

Q: What about for those of us who fall asleep but can't stay that way?

A: For middle-aged men and women, sleep apnea is the most common cause. Anxiety and depression, if they're not well-treated. Acid reflux disease is very common.

Q: Got any suggestions for going back to sleep?

A: If that happens more than two or three times per night, you need medical attention to find out what's waking you up.

Q: What causes insomnia in kids?

A: Number one is sleep apnea, where they're having difficulty breathing in.

That wakes them up multiple times and they don't like that feeling, so they don't want to go to sleep. The second thing is restless leg syndrome, which also is very prevalent in kids but very underdiagnosed.

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THE EXPERT: Dr. Aparajitha Verma weighs in on sleeping pills, coffee before bedtime, naps, sleep apnea and snooze buttons.