

A good night's sleep

By Carol Edwards, RN, GCM

Getting a good night's sleep is just as important for the caregiver as it is for their loved one. So how can we get a full night of rest?

To understand why sleep is important, we first need to understand what it is. Sleep evolves through five stages, culminating in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is when we dream. The body will enter REM sleep approximately every 90 minutes after stage four sleep. Research shows that insufficient REM sleep can result in several adverse health problems, including emotional dysfunction and even psychosis.

Generally, the amount of sleep needed decreases as we age. Five to seven hours of sleep at night is usually sufficient for the elderly.

Aging and sleep

Assuming that sleep is beneficial for the health and well-being of everyone regardless of age, let's consider what contributes to a successful night's rest. Physical and mental stimulation both play a role. For example, being physically healthy is important to achieving good sleep, but keeping physically active is increasingly difficult not only for the elderly but also for busy family caregivers. Busy lifestyles, poor work-life balance, and technological changes and activities are damaging to an active lifestyle and must be supplemented by specific physical exercise. Aging also increases the risk to maintaining an active state, through the physical changes in bodily function, including cardiac, respiratory,

bone and muscle strength. As a result, specific exercise programs for the elderly are essential to maintaining both well-being and successful sleep patterns.

Specific age-related factors include increased awakening during sleep, increased nocturia (or losing bladder control at night), altered perception of the night environment, and increased muscle cramps.

Care for the caregiver

A poor night's sleep can also negatively affect the caregiver, who may still be in the work force. The resulting lack of productivity and potential for job advancement can affect a caregiver's emotional health. Even if a caregiver doesn't work, poor sleep can negatively impact family and social life.

Bedtime tips

- Create a calm environment with subdued lighting at night.
- Toilet before bedtime.
- Check your loved one's nutritional status.
- Allow adequate sleep time, but avoid over sleep.
- Seek professional advice.

For these reasons, caregivers should seek help in caring for the frail elderly. It is unrealistic for a caregiver to work or provide care during the day and evening and then have to look after the person during the night. As such, night-based care must include staff who understand the difference between behaviours exhibited during the day and those at night. If the elderly person lives at home, then private care should be sought.

Seniors in a nursing home face even more challenges. For example, in shared accommodation, with staff intrusion at night and early morning "role calls," sleep patterns are frequently disrupted, leaving the elderly client in a constant state of exhaustion. And, staffing patterns are usually reduced at night so that less supervision is available and the propensity for accidents increases significantly. These factors, coupled with medication, often hinder an older adult in getting proper sleep and thus maintaining or improving their health.

Tips to aid sleep

For these reasons, preparing the older adult for sleep is very important. This includes considering the effects of clothing, toileting, lighting, bed comfort, and medication.

In fact, anything that contributes to a successful night's rest should be considered.

Be aware that hunger prevents and disturbs sleep. As such, a night-time snack can be very calming and will help promote sleep. A warm drink (not alcohol) will also have a calming effect on the elderly at night.

"Laugh and the world laughs with you. Snore and you sleep alone."

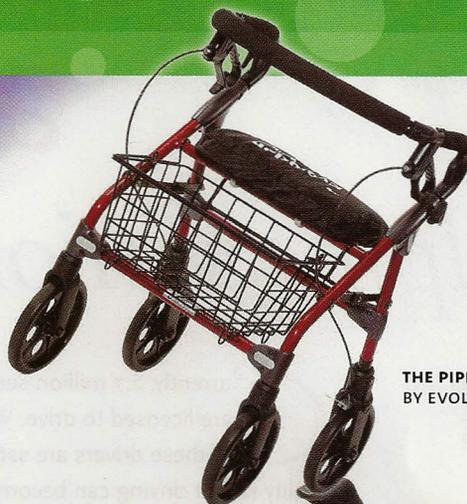
Anthony Burgess

The environment, particularly lighting, is also important. For instance, lighting plays a large part in both warding off the effects of cognitive impairment during the evening hours when "sun-downing" or evening confusion occurs. While it is best to have the lights on to prevent this behaviour from occurring, it is also important to keep the room dark at night to avoid disrupting sleep patterns.

Seeking help and advice from a family physician, geriatrician, geriatric care manager or any other related specialist is important to maintaining the well-being of the elderly. These people can teach you more about sleep and its maintenance. By learning more and by hiring appropriate care, both you and your loved one can achieve a good night's rest. ●

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