

Assessing Sleep Problems

by Tonia Jurbin

Before you worry too much about the quality or quantity of your sleep, determine if you really have a problem! If you feel refreshed when you wake up, you have probably had enough sleep.

Not everyone requires eight hours sleep. Some people require more. (I have a friend who insists that sleep is a food group.)

If you believe that you are suffering from a sleep disorder, examine the relationships between your sleep patterns and recent changes in your life if your problem is new. Look at your lifestyle in general if you have always had problems sleeping. Look at recent changes to your routine including diet, alcohol consumption, physical activity, stress level or sex. It could be that your sleep problem is temporary and something you can resolve for yourself with a little patience and determination.

You may be experiencing disturbed sleep rhythms due to a new job, shift work, a new baby or house guests. A room that is too noisy, too hot or cold, that doubles as an office or a TV room or has an uncomfortable bed is not conducive to a good night's sleep. Discovering why you are having difficulties sleeping is the most important step to solving your problem. A diagnostic sleep questionnaire can

help you to pinpoint the factors that affect your sleep.

After you discover the root cause of your specific sleep problem, or at least have a theory as to what is causing your insomnia, customize a sleep log for yourself. You may decide that keeping a sleep log isn't for you, that it is the last thing you can make time for. Don't be too hasty in dismissing the value of a sleep log, as there are good reasons to keep one, if only for a week. A sleep log provides a means for you to test your assumptions about the cause(s) of your insomnia. By recording your sleep-related behaviors you will become more aware of your sleep patterns, you may find that you get more sleep than you think.

Every sleep log should have a space to record lights out time, how difficult it was for you to fall asleep, the number of times your sleep was disturbed, how long you were awake, what time you woke up, total number of hours you slept and how rested you felt on waking up the next morning. The customized part of the log should have a space for monitoring the variables that you suspect may be causing your insomnia. Try to narrow it down to four or five variables so that you can keep your log simple. Typical factors you may wish to record could include alcohol consumption, exercise, job or family stress, bedtime snack, caffeine intake, napping during the day, big next-day event or sex.

When you have kept your sleep log for a week, go over your notes and try to correlate your previous day and evening variables with the quality and quantity of that night's sleep. You may learn after a week of monitoring that the variables you suspected were disturbing your sleep seemed to have the least effect on the quality of your sleep. You may need to add or change variables and keep logs for longer than a week.

Make the effort to learn more about the nature of your particular sleep problem before you consult a health practitioner. If you do suffer from a serious sleep disorder and need to get help, nothing will be more useful to your practitioner than your own detailed observations. Take responsibility for your own sleep hygiene—nobody knows yourself as well as you do. ■