

Empower Minds.
Strengthen Bodies.
Inspire Creativity.™

It is a common misperception that the quality of a person's sleep decreases as they age. We have all had nights during which we did not sleep well (due to stress, not feeling well, etc.), but this tends to last only one or two nights. Insomnia (trouble falling asleep and staying asleep) is a common complaint with older adults. Many older adults do not just experience a few nights of poor sleep, but may have trouble with insomnia every night.

The negative effects on both a person's physical and mental ability of not getting a good night's sleep is well documented and shows cognition/memory being negatively affected by the lack of sleep. A number of studies have shown that people who have persistent insomnia demonstrate significant decreased ability to learn new information, have diminished performance on cognitive assessment scales, and are potentially at a greater risk for developing Alzheimer's disease.

It is important to periodically assess your sleep patterns. The insomnia you experience may be long-standing and you may have simply come to assume that poor sleep quality is a normal part of the aging process. Implementation of a sleep hygiene program may have a positive effect on your sleep quality with a subsequent improvement in cognition, memory, and physical ability.

The following areas should be assessed:

1. Medication review: Over the counter (OTC) medication should be evaluated as many pain relievers, decongestants, and cough/cold medicines can impair sleep and may be a stimulant. You should talk with your doctor or pharmacist about all medications you take (both over the counter and prescribed) to see if any of them may be affecting your sleep quality. Consider if a medication that may affect sleep quality can be taken earlier in the day.
2. Are you taking a nap during the day? For some people, sleep during the day can affect the quality of sleep at night.
3. Are you exercising late in the day/going for walks after dinner? These activities may cause you to have increased energy at night.
4. What are your eating/drinking patterns? How much caffeine or other liquids are consumed and when? Are big meals/desserts being eaten in the evening? Caffeine is a stimulant and for many people, so is alcohol.
5. What activities do you engage in during the two hours prior to going to bed?
6. Do you read or watch TV in bed?
7. What is the bedroom environment like? Is it noisy and/or uncomfortable? Are there bright lights from the outside?

A sleep hygiene program should consist of the following:

1. The bedroom should only be used for sleeping. There should be no snacking, listening to a radio, or watching TV. If an eReader is used, be aware that the blue spectrum of light is a stimulant.
2. It is important to go to bed and arise at the same time each day.
3. Avoid exercising within 3-4 hours of bedtime.
4. Avoid eating and drinking of liquids after 6 p.m.
5. Avoid taking a hot bath/shower at least 90 minutes prior to going to bed.
6. Avoid alcohol for at least 2 hours before bedtime.
7. Develop a routine/ritual that is performed prior to going to bed. This may include relaxation techniques, such as stretching, yoga, reading, or journaling.
8. If a person cannot fall asleep within 20-30 minutes of going to bed, they should get out of bed and try doing something relaxing before going back to bed.
9. Make sure the bedroom is dark and does not allow outside light (street lighting/sunshine) to come in. The use of room darkening shades may be needed.
10. Check that the bedroom is not too warm. Most people tend to sleep better in a cooler environment.

Something as simple as improving your sleep quality may have a domino effect on your cognition and memory abilities and may eliminate issues associated with mild cognitive impairment.