

Saboteurs of our Sleep

It is not uncommon to experience difficulty sleeping from time to time, but if this condition becomes chronic, there are two common culprits that may be mischievously tampering with your natural rhythms. Interestingly, there are also many other reasons to avoid these two offenders: caffeine and alcohol.

Caffeine

The most potent source of caffeine is in coffee. Coffee is the most irritating to the body and the most likely to cause physical addiction. Caffeine is also an ingredient in many over the counter and prescription medications.

Caffeine is a stimulant. It activates our sympathetic nervous system, the system responsible for our "fight or flight" response. When we consume caffeine, we are more likely to be jumpy and anxious, even more fearful. It often interferes with our ability to relax and sleep soundly.

What you might not be aware of is that caffeine can contribute to a host of other problems as well:

- Caffeine can contribute to elevated serum cholesterol and increased risk of heart disease. It constricts the arteries causing blood pressure to increase. It can also increase heart rate, which is particularly worrisome for those with cardiac arrhythmias.
- Excess caffeine consumption can cause calcium to be leached from the bones and excreted into the urine which puts one at risk for osteoporosis.
- Caffeine is not only a cause of but can exacerbate cystitis (bladder infections). Decaffeinated coffee appears to be just as aggravating as coffee with caffeine.
- Caffeine can raise uric acid levels which can lead to gout, a painful condition of the joints.
- Caffeine is one of the most common causes of chronic diarrhea and may lead doctors to misdiagnose the condition as inflammatory bowel disease. It has a strong laxative effect

because it stimulates nerves that increase intestinal contraction. This can interfere with the bowel's ability to follow its natural rhythms.

- Fibrocystic breast disease is a condition of benign breast lumps that do not turn cancerous. However, breast cancer occurs more frequently in women with the condition. The condition is found to improve markedly or disappear altogether when caffeine is eliminated from the diet.
- Coffee may increase the risk of miscarriage.
- Caffeine addiction can interfere with moods and worsen depression.
- Caffeinated beverages are diuretics and a urinary tract irritant.
- Caffeine consumption stimulates the adrenal glands which create a burst of short-term energy which is always followed by fatigue. If more caffeine is consumed to combat the ensuing fatigue, it causes a vicious cycle where the adrenals become progressively more exhausted and more and more caffeine is needed to offset resulting fatigue. The adrenal glands produce the stress hormone cortisol. Elevated cortisol levels, as a result of this vicious cycle of adrenal stimulation, are associated with inflammation, compromised immunity, increased risk of disease, accumulation of body fat, and decreased quality of sleep.

It is best to eliminate caffeine from your lifestyle if you have any of the following conditions: cardiac arrhythmias, elevated serum cholesterol, hypertension, any gastrointestinal disorder including diverticulitis, any urinary disorder, prostate problems, fibrocystic breast disease, migraine or tension headaches, tremor or seizure disorder, gout, insomnia, premenstrual syndrome, restless leg syndrome, or anxiety.

Alcohol

Despite the reputed benefits of moderate alcohol consumption in increasing HDL (good) cholesterol, I hope that knowing the risks may make you think twice before reaching for your next alcoholic beverage. According to Andrew Weil, MD, "Alcohol is the strongest and most toxic of the common psychoactive drugs. It is a "hard" drug, harder than heroin, cocaine, LSD, and all the other illegal drugs in its impact on the body and on behavior." Over time, it can become physically addictive, especially if it is used to relax or to control anxiety. In fact, it is the most common drug used to relax.

Alcohol can contribute to many problems:

- Heavy alcohol consumption puts you at greater risk for mouth, throat, esophagus, stomach, liver, and colorectal cancers. Smoking increases the risk of cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus, and stomach. Smoking and drinking at the same time increases these risks more than the risk of each single activity. Drinking just one alcoholic beverage daily can increase a woman's risk of breast cancer. It is thought that alcohol encourages the production of free radicals, that alcohol's metabolites are toxic to the body, and that it may interfere with the absorption of cancer-fighting nutrients.
- Alcohol is poisonous to nerve and liver cells. Alcohol encourages vitamin B deficiency, particularly vitamin B-1 (thiamine), which nerve cells need to function properly. It also interferes with another B vitamin, folic acid's protection of the body.
- Alcohol is irritating to the upper digestive and urinary tracts. If consumed on an empty stomach, it can also be very irritating to the lining of the stomach.
- Regular consumption can intensify depression to dangerous levels.
- Alcohol is a diuretic. It promotes fluid loss by inhibiting a pituitary hormone that promotes normal water retention. Dehydration is the most common threat to the blood purification process and places stress on the kidneys.
- The calories in alcohol cannot be stored in the body. They are burned off immediately which means they take the place of food calories that would have been burned in their place.
- Alcoholic beverages are exempt from labeling requirements so your favorite drink may contain harmful additives, artificial coloring, and allergens of which you might not be aware. Wine can contain sulphite preservatives which can precipitate migraine headaches, asthma attacks, and other allergic reactions. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, a known carcinogen, have also been found in alcoholic beverages.

At the very least, give yourself two to three alcohol-free days each week. Consider eliminating alcohol from your lifestyle completely, especially if you feel as though you may become dependent upon it.

References

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