

Sleeping like a baby?

By Deric V. Ravsten, D.O.

It was Bill Cosby who said that, "People who say they sleep like a baby usually don't have one". Others have quipped that to sleep like a baby means to awaken every few hours all night long! Are you having trouble sleeping? When asked about their sleep quality over the previous 12 months, as many as one in three Americans report problems falling asleep or staying asleep.

Insomnia is defined as trouble falling asleep and/or staying asleep, despite having adequate time and opportunity for sleep. Insomnia is typically associated with daytime impairment in functioning. This impairment can seriously affect one's quality of life, result in absenteeism at work or school, and may be a cause of injury to self or others due to the problems associated with daytime tiredness.

In order to identify medical problems that can cause insomnia, a medical history and physical examination are needed. Medical tests and laboratory studies are not generally necessary in the evaluation of insomnia. However, medical risk factors involving cardiac, respiratory and neurologic disorders may necessitate a referral to a sleep study center or specialist for further evaluation and testing.

Aside from medical conditions such as cardiac, respiratory, neurologic or chronic pain disorders, risk factors for insomnia include older age, medications, substance abuse and mental health disorders. Only after a search for medical, medication or substance abuse risk factors has been completed, should the diagnosis of a primary sleep disorder be offered as the reason for the insomnia. As a psychiatrist, insomnia is a common complaint and symptom among mental illnesses. Careful assessment needs to be made before attempting treatment with sleep promoting agents.

For example, someone with chronic sleep problems may use alcohol to help fall asleep. Unfortunately, alcohol use will further worsen insomnia if used on a continuing basis. Similarly, use of sleep promoting agents may help someone to sleep "more soundly" but not result in improved functioning and wellness if the underlying cause of the insomnia is not addressed. As already mentioned, treatment for an underlying medical or mental health disorder may be needed rather than treatment of insomnia alone.

Insomnia is both a symptom of and a contributing risk factor which exacerbates disorders such as Major Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia, ADHD, and PTSD to name just a few. Mental health treatment needs to be specific to the underlying disorder while also addressing symptomatic relief of the insomnia complaint. Psychiatric evaluation and treatment may be necessary for those who have consulted with their family physician or specialist and still suffer from insomnia.

If insomnia is keeping you from sleeping 'better than a baby', help is available. Talk to a mental health expert and find out what can be done.