



GETTING AT THE HEART OF SLEEP PROBLEMS

It's 2 a.m. and, once again, you find yourself awake, staring at a dark ceiling and wondering how you're possibly going to face the day ahead if you can't get back to sleep. A thousand worries fill your mind, and your partner is snoring away, blissfully unaware of your elbow prodding him or her to turn over.

Sleeplessness is a big issue, but feeling tired the next day isn't the entire heart of the problem. That's because research indicates some sleep problems can increase your risk for cardiovascular disease—and some heart problems can disrupt sleep too.

With Heart Month in full swing this February, it's important to take note of how sleep impacts our overall health and, yes, our hearts.

The **National Sleep Foundation** says people who shortchange their sleep have a higher risk for cardiovascular disease than people who get enough sleep—in the range of six to nine hours, depending on the study—regardless of how old, fit, trim or tobacco-free they are.

Yet still far too many of us don't get enough sleep. And there are a number of reasons.



Insomnia: When There Are Not Enough Sheep

You can't sleep. You've tried counting sheep, but you are still tossing and turning. Or you got to sleep, but now you're awake in the middle of the night or far too early.

Even if everyone in your household is asleep, you're not alone in your wakefulness. In fact, Mary Blevins, a supervisor at Adventist Medical Center's [Sleep Disorders Center in Portland, Oregon](#), says insomnia—the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep—is one of the most common complaints she hears.

According to Blevins, a 2005 study found that more than 50 percent of both men and women experience the symptoms of insomnia at least a few times each week.

Despite its growing prevalence, insomnia can be hard to treat because so many things can cause it, including:

- Stress and depression
- Hormonal changes
- Restless leg syndrome or periodic limb movement disorder
- Sleep apnea
- Aging
- Medications

With so many things that could be the root of your insomnia, it's important for you to speak to your health care provider if you're experiencing symptoms. Signs of insomnia include:

- Having a hard time getting to sleep or staying asleep
- Feeling unrested when you wake up
- Experiencing daytime sleepiness
- Coping with mental changes like irritability, anxiety or an inability to concentrate

Make sure you let your provider know how often you're experiencing insomnia and discuss any recent changes in your health, lifestyle or medications that may be impacting your sleep.

No Rest for the Weary: Restless Legs and Periodic Limb Movement

Two of the more common causes of insomnia include restless legs syndrome (RLS) and periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD).

People who suffer from RLS—which is up to 15 percent of Americans—feel odd sensations in their legs as they start to relax and try to sleep. These sensations range from throbbing and creeping to pulling and an uncontrollable urge to move.

RLS can begin at any age and in anyone, but it is more common as we get older and affects about twice as many women as men.

Although PLMD is a separate issue, more than 80 percent of people with RLS also suffer from PLMD. Sleep is disrupted for PLMD sufferers because the disorder causes involuntary leg movement—like a twitch or jerk—which, in turn, often wakes them up.

While the exact cause of these sleep disorders is not known, health care providers are able to treat symptoms through medications and lifestyle changes.

If you're noticing the symptoms of RLS and/or PLMD, your health care provider can help you discover the source of your symptoms and determine what treatment, if any, is needed.

Take Your Breath Away: Sleep Apnea

Some people suffer from a condition that causes them to stop breathing for a moment while they're asleep. Called sleep apnea, this condition is directly linked to heart health risks.

Sleep apnea is often why people seek help with sleep disorders. "The most common complaint of them all is, 'People tell me I snore and stop breathing while I sleep,'" Blevins explains. It's estimated that more than 18 million American adults—more than 6.5 percent of the population—has some degree of sleep apnea.

That's worrisome for millions of hearts too. "In recent years there has been a proven link between obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and cardiovascular disease," says Blevins. "OSA can cause hypertension and possible congestive heart failure, myocardial infarction, stroke and even death."

And, Blevins reminds us, the longer a person goes without diagnosis and treatment of OSA, the more significant the impact on the heart and higher the risk of heart-related death. That makes it all the more important you reach out to your health care provider if you suspect you have sleep apnea.

Five Signs You Need Better Sleep

With how much sleep impacts your overall health—from your mood and ability to concentrate to your heart health and more—it's important to keep an eye on how well you're recharging at night.

A first step is to check your clock and see if you're getting to bed early enough to get the recommended hours of sleep—six or seven hours up to nine is typically suggested. Many phone apps and fitness bands will also track your sleep and provide information about how long you sleep, the proportion of deep to restless sleep you're getting, and even if you're snoring.



Blevins offers five signs that you may need more or better sleep:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness and/or needing a daytime nap
- Difficulty staying awake while sitting still—like while you're watching TV, reading or even driving
- Difficulty concentrating
- Reliance on caffeine to stay away during the day
- Irritability or depression

Tips You Can Sleep On

Although there are more than 80 sleep disorders affecting people, it's very possible the reason you're falling behind on sleep could be fairly simple with an easy fix. Checking with your primary care provider will help you with persistent and more severe symptoms.

He or she may even recommend a sleep study, during which you will be monitored carefully as you sleep. The results can help identify the type and extent of your sleep problems. A sleep study may also guide you and your provider as you create a customized treatment plan.

In addition to visiting with your primary care provider, Blevins offers an array of things you can do to improve the quality of your sleep and make sure you're getting enough of it.

- **Improve common lifestyle problems:**
 - Limit caffeine intake to before lunch and to no more than 2 cups of coffee
 - Avoid alcohol four to six hours before bedtime—alcohol may help you fall asleep but can also be very disruptive to your sleep
 - Complete physical activity at least six hours before bedtime—regular exercise can help you sleep better, as long as it's not too close to bedtime

- Turn off electronic devices and screens at least 30 minutes before you plan to sleep—the artificial light can interfere with your body’s natural sleepiness cues that regulate your sleep schedule
- **Create a good sleeping environment:**
 - Avoid allowing too much light in the room—blackout curtains or eye masks are a great way you can help reduce light
 - Add a white noise machine or fan to your room or try ear plugs to help reduce overall noise—but avoid radio and TV as background noise because these have frequent changes in volume that can disrupt sleep and leave you feeling tired the next day
 - Select a good sleeping temperature that’s comfortable but slightly cooler than your daytime environment—in general, 68 degrees Fahrenheit is best for sleeping, though some people will prefer it colder and others warmer
- **Establish a healthy sleep routine:**
 - Establish a regular wake-up time to help keep your sleep on track, even on the weekends
 - Try to keep a regular bedtime as well, but don’t go to bed until you’re sleepy
 - Avoid taking naps if possible during the day—and if you do nap, limit it to less than one hour and before 3 p.m.
 - Use your bed for sleeping, intimacy and illness—this will help your brain shut down when you get into bed
 - Dedicate time earlier in the day to write down your worries or concerns—this will help you get them out of your system and prevent your mind from fretting about them while you’re getting to sleep
 - Have a regular schedule for your meals, medications, chores and other activities—our bodies operate more smoothly with established routines

You—and Your Heart—Can Sleep Well Again

It’s miserable to go through each day feeling tired and less than your best. It’s also tough on your heart. So take a moment during Heart Month to assess your sleep. Ask yourself if you show signs of poor sleep, and try incorporating some new routines and behaviors that will help you get the rest you need and deserve.

If you’d like to learn more about how to get quality sleep in our fast-paced and stressful world, plan to come to Sleeping Well Again on Thursday, February 25, 2016, at 6:30 p.m.

During this free event at Adventist Medical Center, sleep specialists from Adventist Health’s Sleep Disorders Center will coach you on developing a personalized sleep plan that is based on the latest biological and psychological knowledge about sleep and sleeping well.

For more information and to reserve your free spot in Sleeping Well Again, call 503-256-4000 or [register online](#).