

Sleep Health, with Dr. Caga-anan



Dr. Rexanne Caga-anan

By Cindy Ladage

Dr. Rexanne Caga-anan is part of the SIU's Internal Medicine Program and shared information about the importance of sleep health for today's busy seniors. As

we get older, Dr. Caga-anan said, seniors often fall asleep easily, but staying asleep and getting the needed REM (rapid eye movement) deep sleep time is another story. "There are different stages of sleep, and REM is the deep restorative, completely relaxed sleep that you wake refreshed from," Dr. Caga-anan informed us.

"As part of the normal process of aging, older adults fall asleep earlier in the evening, which leads to waking up earlier in the morning," Dr. Caga-anan said. "Also, they tend to have frequent nocturnal awakenings, with difficulty going back to sleep. Aside from that, the amount of time that they spend in deep, restorative sleep (REM) is reduced, causing them to feel more tired during their waking hours. Because of all

of that, they are prone to taking frequent naps during the day."

How much sleep do we need? This varies for each person Dr. Caga-anan explained. "The best judge is how you feel when you wake. It is still recommended to get at least 8 hours of sleep." If you feel rested, and ready to take on the day, odds are you are getting enough deep REM sleep. However, if you are tired from the get-go, you may not be getting the quota you need. "It is very important to get adequate restorative sleep. If you feel tired during the day, it will be difficult to perform your activities of daily living and have a good quality of life. Most of our seniors still play active roles in their

homes, families, communities and even the workplace. They need their good night's sleep to be able to function effectively. Driving is a safety issue I worry about. They may fall asleep behind the wheel, and they are already accident prone to begin with."

Apart from the changes in sleep due to the aging process, sleep disorders are very common in the elderly. One of these is insomnia, which is the difficulty in falling asleep or maintaining sleep. Dr. Caga-anan also said that those who have an underlying depression and anxiety can really be affected by lack of sleep. Insomnia is usually secondary to poor sleep hygiene (more of that later). Insomnia can be caused by underlying depression or anxiety. At the same time, the lack of sleep can also worsen mood disorders, causing a vicious cycle. It is very important to treat mood disorders, thus leading to improved sleep quality.

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can also disrupt sleep, and a person's perception of pain is worsened with lack of sleep," Dr. Caga-anan said. "A very important and often-overlooked factor is medication. There are a lot of commonly prescribed (and even over the counter) medications with side effects that can affect sleep. I cannot over-emphasize the need to discuss with our doctor if your medications play a role in your sleeping difficulties. It may be as simple as that!"

Medical conditions can also affect sleep. Pain can disrupt sleep and the perception worsens with lack of sleep. Medicines for those with depression can also affect sleep. Both heart failure and COPD and thyroid conditions can cause difficulties with sleep. Bad sleep can be a cause or an effect of lack of sleep. Some medications can cause bad sleep. Benadryl and decongestants are examples.

If you are having problems sleeping, have your medications checked for how they affect you and how they interact with other medications. "It is

worthwhile to discuss this with your doctor," Dr. Caga-anan said, "because so much can be done. While there are sleep aids, behavior change is first. You can get dependent on the sleep aids, and this can lead to becoming tolerant of side effects."

There are other sleep disorders as well, which include Restless Leg Syndrome, characterized by the urge to move the limbs when they are at rest (especially at night). This can be a serious cause of lack of sleep, and can be caused by anemia or kidney problems.

While aging itself is a natural cause of less deep sleep time, there are sleep disorders that can be the culprit. Dr. Caga-anan explained, "Another sleep disorder is sleep apnea, which is caused by collapse/obstruction of the airway during sleep. When this happens, breathing becomes difficult, and the heart has to work harder in order to get oxygen. The body is prevented from resting during sleep, so the person wakes up feeling tired. If untreated, it can lead to high blood pressure, heart failure and stroke, among others. Testing is done by a sleep study, and treatment

involves the use of a CPAP. Screening for sleep apnea can be done with a simple questionnaire. If you think you may have sleep apnea, check with your doctor."

As for insomnia, Dr. Caga-anan shared that this is often caused by lack of good sleep hygiene. "The bed should only be for sleeping and sex, not watching TV or reading. When these activities take place in bed, the bed loses the significance of sleeping. Do non-sleeping activities outside of the bed."

If you lie in bed and can't sleep after 20 minutes, Dr. Caga-anan suggests getting up and doing something non-stimulating (not TV), then go back to bed. Many of us lie in bed at night thinking of all there is to do and mentally make lists. Dr. Caga-anan said that bed is not the place to solve problems! Do what needs to be done to prepare for the next day before heading off to bed. The tasks for tomorrow are done, now it is time to set the mood. "Have the lights off and curtains closed. Don't drink caffeine after dinner and if you are really sensitive to it, not after lunch. Avoid alcohol around bedtime and do exercises earlier in the day."

Warm showers and baths should be completed at least two hours before bed, and like we tell our children and grandchildren, keep a set bedtime schedule. "I often utilize a sleep diary to see what time the patient went to bed, when they went to sleep, and when they woke up. With this, I can identify the specific sleep problems they have." For those in nursing homes and hospitals, sleeping can be difficult, especially with the disruptions of the nursing staff, the medical needs of the other residents/patients, and by virtue of being in an unfamiliar environment.

The key to addressing sleep problems is to identify the cause, because fixing the underlying condition can lead to improved sleep. There are many available medications in the market to help with sleep; however, behavioral changes and sleep hygiene practices are most effective and should be considered as the first-line in therapy. These are just a few of the ways to increase sleep health. A good night's sleep is more valuable than we thought. Turn off the lights, turn off the noise, then turn off the brain and get some Z's!