

Sleep may be the fountain of youth

By Ellen Waldman

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“To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub.” — Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act III

If this quote made you nod your head in recognition, you might want to join my club. I call it the “middle of the night book club,” and I’m its only member.

That’s because when I wake up at some dark hour and can’t fall back asleep, I get to do some reading instead. It has seemed to work, but sleeping is something we all want to get more of. Doing some research on this topic has resulted in many good resources both locally and online.

At A Geriatric Society Conference I attended in October, I heard a presentation entitled “Too Much of a Good Thing? How to Effectively Deprescribe.” Dr. Cara Tannenbaum, director of the Canadian Deprescribing Network, was the specialist whose presentation really woke me up, so to speak.

Too many older adults are taking sleeping pills, or what they often call sleep aides, she said. But all sleeping meds (especially benzodiazepines such as Xanax and Valium) increase fall risks by 47%-57%. Also, over-the-counter sleep meds that people use, such as Tylenol PM, have powerful cognitive effects; none of them positive. And the more natural supplements such as melatonin showed very few effects in studies. They reduced sleep latency (how long it takes to fall asleep) by only nine minutes and increased total sleep time by only eight minutes.

All is not lost though, as there are numerous other helpful methods to getting more and better-quality sleep.

Here’s a link to one the most useful tools I’ve found, www.deprescribingnetwork.ca/useful-resources. On the Deprescribing Network Canada website, Tannenbaum provides a 19-page booklet called “How to Get a Good Night’s Sleep Without Medication.” The process includes six steps to ensure a good night’s sleep: Start a sleep diary; Develop good sleep habits; Dispel myths; Manage daily stress; Benefit from good sleep hygiene; Taper off sleeping pills.

If this link is difficult for you to access, send me an email through my website and I will email you the booklet as an attachment. It’s that worth it. A sleep diary alone has been shown to increase sleep efficiency by 65%.

Tannenbaum also sent us to this website: My Sleepwell Canada (<https://mysleepwell.ca>). One of its main focuses is the use of a therapy called CBTi or cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia. CBTi is recommended as the initial treatment of insomnia. Compared to sleeping pills, CBTi is more effective, with long lasting benefits, is much safer, and is less costly than taking sleeping pills for months or years.

Some call it sleep therapy. CBTi uses a nonmedication approach that helps get your sleep back. It is an effective technique for treating insomnia, especially for people who experience long-lasting types of insomnia, not just sleep difficulties that last one or two nights every now and again. Maybe Canada is onto something.

Another worthwhile article includes “Deep Sleep May Act as Fountain of Youth in Old Age,” in the University of California Berkeley News, 2017 (<https://news.berkeley.edu/2017/04/05/deep-sleep-aging/>).

Here’s a quote from the article: “Nearly every disease killing us in later life has a causal link to lack of sleep,” said the article’s senior author, Matthew Walker, a UC Berkeley professor of psychology and neuroscience. Another wakeup call for more sleep, for sure.

The National Institute on Aging has a great article called “A Good Night’s Sleep” (www.nia.nih.gov/health/good-nights-sleep). It says that an ongoing lack of sleep or poor-quality sleep increases your risk of health problems such as cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression and obesity. It’s also linked to memory problems, forgetfulness and more falls or accidents. How is anyone going to be able to sleep worrying about this?

As for local resources, we have two sleep centers that require a referral from your primary care doctor. One is Asante Physician Partners Pulmonary Consultants and Sleep Specialists in Medford (541-789-4320). You can make an appointment for an evaluation and treatment. Its staff will evaluate what is best for your needs and direct your care throughout the process.

The other one is the Providence Sleep Disorders Center, also in Medford (541-732-7888). It provides a wide range of diagnostic sleep testing procedures, as well as home sleep testing.

Sleeping is very important for our aging bodies and minds. If you need help with this, try these suggestions. And remember the quote: to sleep, perchance to sleep? We can hope.