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Sleep Medication

Sleeping pills

Sleeping pills or prescribed hypnotic drugs, if used at all, should only be recommended for short-term use. Many sleeping pills have some benefit for a few weeks at the most. People then find they have to either increase their dose to get the same effect or have to change to another type of sleeping medication.

If they try to quit, they may experience a 'rebound' effect for several nights including feelings of anxiety and poor sleep that can be as bad or worse than before they started taking the pills. It is an indication of some physiological dependence.

For this reason some practitioners recommend medications on alternate nights only. The patient then experiences better sleeps on pill nights and poor sleeps on non-pill nights. Of course the poor sleep on non-pill nights will increase sleep pressure and help to ensure better sleep on the next night and add to the effect of the pill. Although this alternating pattern might reduce physiological dependence, the strong association of good sleep with the pill and poor sleep without may produce psychological dependence.

Some longer acting sleep medications have a less noticeable rebound effect during withdrawal. However, because they can carry over into the next day, they can produce a range of daytime side-effects such as drowsiness, dizziness, fatigue, memory loss, reduced ability to concentrate and confusion. These side effects, and an increased risk of falls make them problematic particularly for older adults.

The ideal medical model, for example, the curing of a bacterial infection with an appropriate antibiotic drug, does not apply to the use of sleeping pills to try to "cure" insomnia. The pills can provide some temporary symptomatic relief just as aspirin can reduce the fever and make you feel better during a bacterial infection but it won't stop the infection.

Sleep medications mask the insomnia symptoms and do not cure the insomnia because they do not address the causes of the insomnia. Therefore, they are not a long-term solution for chronic insomnia.

Research has shown that the strategies for changing your behaviours and thoughts, as described in this book, provide more effective long-term improvement of sleep for people with chronic

insomnia.

If you wish to stop taking your sleeping tablets you must consult your doctor who will supervise a gradual withdrawal to reduce rebound insomnia effects. Remember that this is due to the withdrawal of the drug and doesn't mean that you can't sleep without sleeping pills. During the withdrawal time, use other non-drug methods as described above (such as Bedtime Restriction Therapy) for helping to get to sleep and maintain sleep thus minimising the drug withdrawal effects.

Herbal remedies

There are many herbal remedies available that promise improved sleep for those with insomnia. Some are taken as tablets and some in the form of herbal teas.

The few scientific studies to investigate these over-the-counter preparations have not shown convincing benefits. In contrast, the therapies and techniques in this book have considerable scientific support and are more effective than prescribed medications.