

## **SLEEP....DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY**

As we age many of us notice that our sleeping patterns change. Often it becomes more difficult to get to sleep and we sleep for shorter periods during the night. Because of this, many seniors take medications to help them sleep. The medications most often prescribed by doctors for this purpose are in a group called "benzodiazepines". You many know these pills by many other names including: Lorazepam, Ativan, Restoril, Temazepam, Halcion, Valium, diazepam, Serax, oxazepam, bromazepam, clonazepam, Dalmane, flurazepam alprazolam and Xanax.

These can all be used for sleeping pills and as calming or "nerve pills" It is important to know that these medications are different from those used to treat depression. In most cases these pills should only be taken for a short period of time. This is because long term use can cause several problems in the elderly including the following:

- ✓ Prolonged use of sleeping pills can result in a tolerance to the drug so that a larger and larger dose is required to get the original effect.
- ✓ If these pills are stopped suddenly withdrawal symptoms such as sleeplessness, restlessness, anxiety and agitation can occur.
- ✓ The elderly are more sensitive to the sedative or depressant side effects of these drugs that can cause fatigue, drowsiness, dizziness and confusion.
- ✓ Research has shown that the elderly who take these drugs have a higher rate of falls, hip fractures and motor vehicle accidents than those who do not use them.
- ✓ Excessive use of sleeping pills can also make other medical conditions such as COPD or sleep apnea worse.
- ✓ Using both alcohol and sleeping pills will make the side effects of these drugs worse
- ✓ Excessive use of alcohol can also make insomnia worse.
- ✓ Over the counter sleeping pills have many of the same adverse effects as benzodiazepines such as dizziness, drowsiness and confusion

It is important to use all medications only as prescribed. Any person taking medications should also be aware of potential side effects. Your Doctor and your Pharmacist are the best people to help you understand your medications and their side effects.

## Getting a Good Night's Sleep

To get a good night's sleep it is important to have good sleeping habits. The following is a list of tips, which can help establish a regular sleep pattern without the use of sleeping pills:

1. *Do not use caffeine containing products (coffee, tea chocolate), nicotine and alcohol, especially later in the day*
2. Do not drink large amounts of liquids after supper to prevent having to get up frequently to the bathroom during the night.
3. Do not nap in the daytime especially later in the day.
4. Get regular physical activity such as walking or gardening during the day
5. Do not exercise vigorously in the evening too close to bedtime
6. *Establish a consistent sleep routine. Get up at the same time every day, including weekends. Use an alarm clock if it will help.*
7. Create an atmosphere that encourages sleep.
8. Keep the room at a comfortable temperature.
9. Keep the bedroom dark (using dark window shades may help)
10. Try to keep noise levels low (using ear plugs may help)
11. Do not watch television in the bedroom.
12. When you are in bed relax and think pleasant thoughts to help you drift off to sleep (adapted from Prevention Source BC fact sheets)

Once you are able to establish a regular routine you may find that you do not require medications to help you to sleep. It is important to ensure a good night's sleep without the use of medications if at all possible. The side effects of sleep inducing medications can leave us feeling drowsy and confused instead of energized for the activities of the day!