# Lifewire: Sleep disorders increase as you get older

*by Ven Griva*

It may sound like a recurring theme, but medical research shows that sleep is essential to both physical and mental health, especially among the elderly.

That point was driven home in a November report from the International Longevity Center-USA, which is affiliated with the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City.

"The prevalence of sleep-related problems increases with age," said Dr. Harrison Bloom, co-author of the study report and senior associate with the center. "A common misconception is that older individuals require less sleep and older people themselves believe they need less sleep than younger people."

In fact, as many as 50 percent of older adults are afflicted with a chronic sleep disorder, such as insomnia, sleep apnea, early morning awakening and periodic limb movement, also known as restless leg syndrome.

Many clinicians are unaware of the serious conditions associated with insomnia in older adults, the report states. Older adults with sleep problems are more likely to be depressed, suffer attention and memory problems, experience daytime sleepiness and are at higher risk of falls than those who have good quality of sleep.

If older adults suffer from insomnia, a thorough medical evaluation could be beneficial.

The International Longevity Center-USA recommends the following tips for healthful sleep hygiene:

- Go to bed at the same time each night, and get up and out of bed at the same time each morning.

- Keep your bedroom/sleeping area dark, cool, quiet, restful and comfortable.

- If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed and read something boring until you feel sleepy.

- Engage in physical activity, outdoors if possible, during the day (at least four hours before bedtime).

- Take a hot bath 60 to 90 minutes before bedtime.

- Listen to soft or soothing music.

- Use visualization - picture a relaxing scene.

Avoid:

- Caffeinated beverages - including coffee, tea and soda - for at least six hours before going to bed

- Drinking alcohol for two hours before bedtime (daytime alcohol consumption should be moderate)

- Smoking tobacco at least four hours before bedtime (of course, it's best not to smoke at all)

- Falling asleep with the television on

- Exercise within four hours of bedtime

- Reading stimulating material while in bed just before turning out the lights

- Taking a long nap (more than 30 minutes) during the day

- Going to bed too hungry or too full. If hungry, a light carbohydrate snack (e.g., crackers with milk) may help.

# FLU PREVENTION

Flu season, which runs from November through March in the United States, is picking up steam, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Though it varies, flu season can last as late as May.

Recent data shows a serious outbreak in Florida stretching north into Georgia.

If you haven't received a flu shot, now would be a good time. But remember, the influenza vaccinations are in no way foolproof.

In fact, flu shots provide less protection that previously believed, new research has shown. So it is more vital now than ever to supplement the vaccine by taking additional steps to ward off infection.

The annual shot cuts the risk of catching the flu by only about 30 percent to 40 percent, at best, in younger adults. But it tends to make the infection less severe, and it reduces the risk of serious complications. Here's what our medical consultants recommend for warding off influenza:

Get the shot if you are at high risk or just want protection. Susceptible groups include pregnant women; people age 50 or older, or age 6 months to 5 years; folks with chronic illness such as diabetes or heart or lung disease, or people who care for infants under the age of 7 months.

An alternative to the shot is a nasal spray, though it is approved only for those aged 5 to 49 and isn't appropriate if you are pregnant or have a chronic disease or weakened immune system. Avoid the shot and spray if you are allergic to eggs.

Experts suggest the following to decrease your chances of coming down with colds or flu:

- Wash your hands frequently to avoid transferring the virus to your nose, mouth or eyes.

- Cough or sneeze into tissues.

- Avoid close contact with sick people, and stay home if you have a cough or fever.

- Strengthen your immune system by eating well, exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep and reducing stress.

- If you smoke, quit. Tobacco smokers are more likely than nonsmokers to get the flu and are more likely to die from its complications.

- Don't rely on herb supplements. Researchers have tested many of these products, from echinacea and ginseng to vitamin E and oscillococcinum, a homeopathic remedy. So far, none of them has proved effective at preventing the flu.

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