

AZ Mental Health: Sleep on It

Written by Michael Yasinski M.D.

Thursday, 23 August 2012 10:28 - Last Updated Thursday, 23 August 2012 10:34

Psychiatrist Michael Yasinski M.D. discusses the side effects of sleeping pills.



Ambien, Lunesta, Ativan and Restoril are some of the common medications taken for insomnia by more than 10 percent of the population each year. As a psychiatrist, I treat patients with insomnia frequently and many who request sedatives out of desperation to get some rest. In their desperation, people often ignore the potential side effects of the medications and, ultimately, put themselves at risk.

One of the most publicized side effects of Ambien is the effect it has on people's sleep-related activity. Disturbingly, it is quite common for people to prepare an entire meal in the middle of the night with no recollection of cooking or eating. Other relatively frequent problems include driving a car without remembering, smoking cigarettes in your sleep, making embarrassing phone calls and wandering outside the house.

How can this happen? Most sleeping pills have similar effects on the brain as alcohol does. They target the same GABA receptor that causes many of the same undesirable consequences of alcohol use. Although sleeping pills are meant to be used on a short-term basis, many people end up taking them on a regular basis. To avoid longer term consequences, the pills should be taken a few times per week for up to a couple of months to address insomnia related to a stressful period in life. If insomnia is a longstanding problem, ruling out an underlying problem like depression, anxiety or sleep apnea is necessary.

Taking hypnotics regularly for long periods can make getting off of them very difficult due to the extreme physical discomfort and mental anguish that occurs during withdrawal. Also, stopping most sleeping pills abruptly can cause life-threatening consequences like grand mal seizures and potential death. The fear of the withdrawal symptoms often leads people to stay on them indefinitely even if they desire to stop taking them.

With continued use of sleeping pills, cognition often becomes impaired. Attention span plummets, memory noticeably deteriorates and the brain essentially functions in slow motion. These problems are magnified as people age, and older people are also at risk for having severe behavioral changes or extreme confusion.

A recent study showed that people taking sleeping pills, even if sporadically, have a higher rate of mortality. While not a cause-and-effect study, the people taking sleeping pills tended to have more medical problems and drug interactions that ultimately led to their earlier deaths. Will you die earlier if you continue to take sleeping pills? Not necessarily but this recent study, along with the detrimental side effects, may be something to consider if you are on the fence about taking them in the first place.

Like most everything in life that is desirable, using sleeping pills in moderation and only when necessary is the key. Regardless of how often they are used, sleeping pills and alcohol make a deadly combination that can inhibit the ability to breathe and lead to death. Avoid taking them together at all costs.

TO LEARN MORE:

Yasinski Psychiatry www.yasinskipsychiatry.com.