

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Better sleep

Lack of quality sleep can lead to serious health issues

By Marion Callahan

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There was a time when Marion Mass dreaded bedtime.

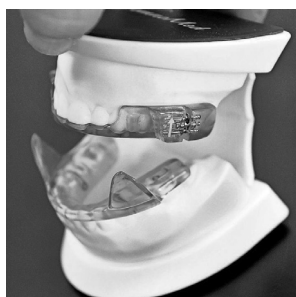
She would lie in bed for hours hoping to fall into a restful sleep, only to grow increasingly anxious as the hours passed. As a pediatrician with three children, the lack of sleep took a toll on her mental and physical health, triggering anxiety, headaches and abdominal pain.

"When I saw it affecting me physically, I knew I needed to see a sleep specialist," said Mass, who sought help three weeks into the disorder. "As a physician, I thought I should be able to handle it all on my own, but I couldn't do it."

The New Britain Township, Pennsylvania, resident was advised to take medication for a short period of time to help re-establish night sleep patterns and to incorporate relaxation therapies into her bedtime routine. Practicing good "sleep hygiene" also was a big part of it. That meant avoiding caffeine after 10 a.m., steering clear of food and screen time before bedtime and continuing a good diet and exercise plan. Playing calming music and spraying lavender oils on her sheets also helped.

Today, at 49, Mass is a big promoter of sleep and doesn't take a restful night for granted. Doctors and scientists have linked severe shortages of sleep to obesity, depression, diabetes, hypertension and early death.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 50 million to 70 million adults in the U.S. have a sleep disorder, and snoring is a



prominent symptom.

"You sleep for one-third of your life but it's largely ignored by many as a health issue," said Dr. Les Szekely, director of Doylestown (Pennsylvania) Health's Sleep Center. "Americans are sleeping one-and-a-half to two hours less than they did 50 years ago, and there will be health consequences to that."

Citing a survey tracking Americans' sleep behaviors, the National Sleep Foundation said 45 percent of Americans reported that "poor or insufficient sleep" affected their day at least once in the last seven days. One-third of those surveyed reported their sleep quality as "poor" or "only fair," despite sleeping within the recommended number of hours a night.

But an area behavioral sleep specialist notes that there is no magic "number of sleep hours" that works for everybody of the same age.

Whether more sleep means better daytime function and health depends on the person, said Dr. Michael Perlis, director of University of Pennsylvania's Behavioral Sleep Medicine Program. "People, in general, would be better off with more sleep (say 7-8 hours). This said, everyone's sleep need, ability and opportunity greatly differ, and thus what is optimal for one person may differ from what is optimal for another person."

Sometimes less but higher quality sleep "trumps" longer, but lower quality, sleep, he said.

"Ideally, 90 percent of time in bed should be asleep," he said. "The best thing people can do is experiment with sleep duration



Above: A CPAP mask for nighttime use that is designed to keep breathing airways open. Left: A mouthpiece that can be used to push out the lower jaw during sleep to help open the airway in the throat and prevent sleep apnea.

[ART GENTILE PHOTOS]

Tips for better sleep

Good sleep habits — often referred to as "sleep hygiene" — can help you get a good night's sleep. Tips offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention include:

- Be consistent. Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each morning, including on the weekends.
- Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, relaxing, and at a comfortable temperature.
- Remove electronic devices, such as TVs, computers, and smart phones, from the bedroom.
- Avoid large meals, caffeine and alcohol before bedtime.
- Establish a relaxing bedtime routine.
- Get some exercise. Being physically active during the day can help you fall asleep more easily at night.

a bit and keep track of how they feel and function."

Fatigue and lethargy during the day shouldn't be ignored, Szekely said.

The lack of "quality" sleep could lead to a variety of medical conditions — some of which are fatal, he said. The brain and body require sleep for its restorative functions. Sleep, he said, helps balance or reduce stress levels and even strengthen the body's immune system. Studies show that people who don't get quality sleep or enough sleep are more likely to get sick after being exposed to a virus, such as a common cold virus. Lack of sleep also can affect how fast you recover if you do get sick. Infection-fighting antibodies and cells are reduced during periods of sleep deprivation.

During sleep, certain chemicals and hormones are released that help regulate metabolic rate and other necessary bodily functions, Szekely said.

"Without enough sleep, a multitude of different hormones can be interfered with and can translate into weight gain and lethargy," he said.



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