

Keyword: The London Clinic

Cant sleep?

A recent study by Americas National Sleep Foundation revealed that an exhausted 70% of American women frequently have trouble sleeping, compared with just 52% of men. A sorry one-third of the women surveyed complained that they often had to cancel friends, family and exercise, and forego sex due to sleep problems.

Small wonder then, that we keep hearing that sleep is the new sex its fast becoming such an elusive luxury that if a woman is lucky enough to get a lot of it at once, she will brag about it shamelessly.

Professor Gaby Badre, a sleep expert at [the](#) London Clinic, is not surprised by the findings. Women are the most sleep-deprived creatures on earth. Their sleep is often more fragmented than mens. I see a lot of female professionals who are stressed and cant unwind when they go to bed. Take a board meeting: men can go in, act aggressively and then switch off. Women are more prone to taking the problem home. A classic insomnia scenario is waking up in the early hours of the morning at exactly the same time, say, 4.52am. Insomniacs do this because their body clock becomes sensitised after waking up once or twice at that hour. Although early-morning waking can be a symptom of depression, there are lots of other reasons for this, including stress or fluctuating hormones, says Dr Meir Kryger, the author of *Cant Sleep, Cant Stay Awake: A Womans Guide to Sleep Disorders*.

Of course, one of the main factors pushing up the statistics for womens insomnia is caring for babies. So are women actually hard-wired to wake up when an infant cries, in a way that men are not? Im not convinced that its an evolutionary quirk, says Kryger. I have observed cases in families where the man agrees to share bottle-feeding shifts during the night, and he wakes up perfectly easily. The human brain filters out all noise it subconsciously knows it is safe to ignore. So if the man was home alone with the baby, you can be sure he would wake up. The following is a guide to the main factors affecting womens sleep and what you can do to address the problem.

PMS

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According to a 1998 survey by the National Sleep Foundation, 70% of women reported their sleep was disturbed by periods. The quality of sleep worsens in the second half of a womans cycle because rising progesterone levels increase body temperature. Then, in the week running up to menstruation, PMS symptoms such as bloating, headaches and mood swings can all trigger brief awakenings during the night. Stomach cramps and a raised body temperature can also cause sleep problems.

The solution Top up sleep during the day by taking brief naps. Everyone needs a core sleep of about six hours a night, says Badre. However, whats really important is how much you sleep during a 24-hour period. The missing sleep can be recouped during the day via micro sleep naps lasting 5-20 minutes, but no longer. PREGNANCY

The same 1998 survey found that 80% of pregnant women reported disturbed sleep. Pelvic pressure, lower-back pain, vivid nightmares and the need to go to the bathroom were all common factors.

In the first trimester, progesterone levels which have a negative affect on sleep are on the rise. In addition, morning sickness can cause women to wake earlier than normal. During the second trimester, heartburn can become problematic, as can restless legs syndrome (see right). In the third trimester, some women develop nasal congestion and start snoring. They can also become breathless. And, of course, the baby kicking and the problem of finding a comfortable position are also issues.

The solution Avoid eating spicy foods that might cause heartburn. Take frequent afternoon naps and try pregnancy yoga. Otherwise, the only solution is to grin and bear it, knowing its for a finite period.

MENOPAUSE

The years preceding menopause, known as perimenopause, are when symptoms such as hot flushes start kicking in, often disturbing sleep. Perimenopause symptoms can go on for five years, sometimes up to 10 years, before menopause (average age 52). A 2003 study found that between 80% and 90% of menopausal women experienced hot flushes,

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disrupting, on average, three nights sleep a week. Night sweats and waking up shivering as the bodys thermostat struggles to regulate temperature are common. Depression, anxiety and irritation may also cause insomnia.

The Solution HRT may help, if appropriate for you. In addition, the 2003 survey indicated that smokers and obese women were twice as likely to suffer night sweats, so adopt healthier habits. Also, regulate the temperature of your bedroom. I advise women who have hot flushes to be careful about room and bed temperature aim for between 18C and 21C, says Badre. RESTLESS LEGS SYNDROME

This is characterised by twitching legs and sometimes arms before and during sleep. Its often accompanied by a creepy-crawly sensation on the skin and a need to get up and move around. Women are twice as likely to suffer from the condition as men (10% of all women). Pregnancy can cause it up to 25% of pregnant women experience the symptoms but in those cases it usually disappears afterwards. Other causes are low folic acid and vitamin B12 levels, and iron deficiency, which is often caused by menstrual problems.

The solution Get your iron levels tested to check for anaemia, and also test levels of folic acid and B12 to establish a possible cause. You should also avoid extreme dieting. There is no doubt that fad diets put women at risk of iron deficiency, which can cause the syndrome, says Kryger. THINGS THAT GO BUMP INTHE NIGHT

Of course, there are many other variables affecting the quality of sleep, from anxiety about work, family and relationships to upstairs neighbours clip-clopping around on wooden floors. Then theres the biggest sleep hazard of all sharing a bed. I see a lot of women who have dramatically reduced sleep because their partner snores or moves their limbs like a wriggling fish during sleep, says Kryger. Women snore too, of course, but fewer of us do it. Other things that may be stealing sleep include undiagnosed allergies to bedclothes, which may be causing breathing problems, sleeping on a full or an empty stomach, and the impact of caffeine, alcohol and drugs.

The solution Scrutinise your life for any of the above factors that might inhibit sleep. If stress is an issue, try to establish a relaxing ritual

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in the hour or two before going to bed. Ironing, sorting laundry and unloading the dishwasher are all good ways to switch off. In the case of snoring from the other side of the bed, it could be time to decamp to the spare room. After all, chances are you are too exhausted for sex anyway.

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