

TREATMENT

Good sleep hygiene is the first step in the treatment of sleep phase disorders. This involves having a regular bed-time, and regular get up time. The following techniques can also be useful in the treatment of sleep phase disorders.

Restriction of Time in Bed

A doctor helps the person to limit the time they spend in bed and no naps are allowed during the day. This causes some degree of sleep deprivation which helps the person fall asleep quicker and stay asleep throughout the night.

Light Therapy

Someone with a sleep phase disorder should also be exposed to bright light at certain times of the day. The time of day that they need to be in the bright light will differ depending on the disorder and can be worked out with a sleep doctor. For example, a person with Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome should get up early in the morning and either go outside in the bright sunlight or be exposed to a bright artificial light to help reset their body clock.

Medication

Certain kinds of medication (like melatonin) may also be useful in the treatment of sleep phase disorders if the steps mentioned above are not successful. The use of melatonin should be discussed with a doctor as it is important that it be taken at the right time of day and in the correct dosage.



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SLEEP TIMING DISORDERS



SLEEP TIMING

JET LAG

The body has a 24 hour sleep and wake cycle which is predominately regulated by light and dark. If you travel quickly across time zones, your body gets confused about when to sleep and when to wake up. The symptoms which result from this confusion are together called “time zone change syndrome” or jet lag.

The symptoms of jet lag which relate to sleep can include difficulty sleeping, excessive sleepiness and daytime drowsiness. There may be other symptoms such as altered appetite or gastrointestinal dysfunction. It takes about one day per hour time difference to recover from sleep related symptoms of jet lag. It has been noticed that symptoms last longer if you fly east. The amount of sleep deprivation a person suffers while travelling will affect the severity of the symptoms of jet lag as well as the time it takes for the symptoms to improve. The best way to combat jet lag is to try and get enough sleep while travelling, eat small, healthy meals regularly and drink plenty of water. Make sure you make time to relax and recover from your travels. The sooner you settle into regular patterns of eating and sleeping in a new place the better.

SLEEP PHASE

The term ‘sleep phase’ refers to the period of time spent asleep in a day. Although sleep varies from person to person, most people have a sleep phase of about 8 hours which occurs somewhere between 9.00pm and 8.00am. A person’s sleep phase can cause them problems when it doesn’t fit in with their lifestyle and daily commitments. People who are out of phase often remain awake despite all of their attempts to go to sleep. For this reason they are often incorrectly diagnosed with insomnia.

DELAYED SLEEP PHASE SYNDROME

A person with delayed sleep phase syndrome can not fall asleep until after midnight, sometimes not until two or three o’clock in the morning. These people have a natural tendency to keep sleeping until nine or ten o’clock the next morning. This is not a problem if these sleeping times suit the person’s lifestyle. It becomes a problem when the person tries to fall asleep at the ‘usual’ time. For example, if a person with delayed sleep phase syndrome goes to bed at 10.00pm they may toss and turn for two or three hours becoming anxious and angry at their inability to fall asleep. Sometimes the person can fall asleep for half an hour and then wake up and find themselves awake until 1am or 2am. The more the person is unable to sleep the more frustrated they become. Delayed sleep phase syndrome can lead to varying degrees of sleep deprivation. If a person with delayed sleep phase syndrome has to get up between 6am and 7am to go to work, they may only have had 5 or 6 hours sleep. This may leave them tired and cranky during the day. They may experience safety, personal and social problems as a result of this tiredness.

ADVANCED SLEEP PHASE SYNDROME

Advanced sleep phase syndrome is a disorder very similar to delayed sleep phase syndrome but the person feels the need to go to bed early, sometimes as early as 6pm. They then wake up at 3am or 4am and are unable to go back to sleep. The diagnosis of a sleep phase syndrome is based on the person’s history and an overnight sleep study. Many people have experienced some degree of delayed or advanced sleep phase throughout their life. Most people can correct their sleep patterns themselves. These syndromes become a problem when the person can not change their sleep pattern to fit their lifestyles.

SHIFT WORK DISORDER

People who do shift work or who have irregular work hours often work when their body tells them to sleep. Like many bodily functions, sleep follows a daily pattern. When this pattern is disrupted, the person may have trouble sleeping when they want to sleep. People with shift work disorder can also suffer from tiredness and reduced personal performance when they are awake. They may suffer both insomnia and excessive daytime sleepiness. This can lead to safety risks and can affect the person’s family and social life. It is thought that if you do shift work for long enough, you can develop a long term sleep disturbance. The only real way to avoid shift work sleep disorder is to maintain a regular work schedule and a regular sleep and wake pattern.