

Lyn Patrick column of Feb. 12, 2007

Headline:

# Natural medicine may help solve sleep disorders

Story:

One of the important principles of natural medicine is to identify and treat the cause of disease. Often this includes a thorough review of what might be considered simple lifestyle habits – diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol intake, etc. – things that all health-care providers ask about. Unfortunately, there is one lifestyle habit that is rarely assessed and is now known to be a major contributor to both depression and disease and a normal part of American life: sleep deprivation. Studies indicate that as much as 74 percent of Americans do not get enough sleep each night. Lack of sleep leads to serious health problems: fatigue, obesity, a suppressed immune system and a shortened life span. Sleep deprivation also increases the risk of major illnesses: high blood pressure, heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, breast cancer, nighttime heartburn, depression and memory loss. Studies have shown that as one stays awake for more than 16 hours a day, the ability of the brain and muscles to function decreases to levels equivalent to those in someone with a blood-alcohol level between 0.05 percent and 0.1 percent. (The legal limit for driving in the U.S. is 0.08 percent.) Sleep researchers believe that many cases of “influenza” are really sleep deprivation – resulting in symptoms of stomach upset and increased head, muscle and joint pain. In sleep-deprived people, these symptoms have been shown to go away with sufficient amounts of deep sleep. “Sleeping it off” may actually be just that, when trying to get over what appears to be the flu. Sleep deprivation is considered less than eight continuous hours of sleep each night and can result from a variety of conditions grouped under the category of sleep disorders. The most common are insomnia, sleep apnea, restless leg syndrome and circadian rhythm sleep disorders (often found in graveyard shift workers and those traveling between time zones). Natural medicine solutions to sleep disorders include all the standard suggestions that health-care providers make: eliminating caffeine, exercise, eliminating noise in the sleeping environment, etc. However, natural medicine providers also will look at other causes of sleep disorder – inadequate melatonin production (often seen in those with circadian rhythm sleep disorder), identification of food allergies leading to a form of sleep disorder known as food-allergy insomnia, increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol leading to what is generally called idiopathic insomnia (“no known cause”), and ruling out problems with blood-sugar metabolism in those with sleep apnea. When no underlying cause other than simple stress and “too much worrying” appears to be the cause of a sleep disorder, yoga exercises or plant medicines might be

suggested. Clinical trials have shown that yoga is able to improve sleep, fatigue and quality of life in those with sleep disorders. The use of botanical medicine in the treatment of sleep disorders has been widely studied. Plant preparations of hops (*Humulus lupulus*), several species of ginseng (*Panax* species), kava kava (*Piper menthasticum*) and passion flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) as well as low doses of the hormone melatonin has been shown to improve quality and quantity of sleep in those with sleep disorders. These natural medicines must be used under the direction of a trained health-care provider as they need to be used in specific dosages and are not always indicated for children or pregnant women.

Lyn Patrick received her degree in naturopathic medicine from Bastyr University in Seattle. She practiced naturopathic medicine as *a primary-care provider in Arizona for 17 years before moving to Durango. Green Medicine appears on the second Monday of each month.*