

Lack of Sleep Increases Seniors' Health Risks



Dementia is a common (and commonly recognized) problem in older adult populations. Forgetfulness, inability to focus and daytime sleepiness can all be symptoms of dementia; however, they are also symptoms of sleep disturbance, which is an easily overlooked problem in the elderly.

An October blog post on [**The New York Times' Web site**](#) highlights the growing understanding of the potential for misdiagnosis of dementia in people who have sleep disturbances such as apnea. Sonia Ancoli-Israel, professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, estimates that "almost half of older adults experience apnea to some degree."

Effects of sleep disturbances

Sleep disturbances can have numerous adverse effects. According to the [**National Sleep Foundation**](#), untreated sleep apnea puts a person at risk for cardiovascular disease, headaches, memory loss and depression. The [**Columbus Community Health Regional Sleep Disorders Center**](#) provides a comprehensive list of medical problems that cause sleep disorders, as well as health problems caused by sleep disturbances, noting that "the prevalence of sleep apnea increases with age and is particularly high in seniors."

In addition, the center confirms that "a significant number of patients seeking evaluation for possible Alzheimer's dementia instead suffer from reversible cognitive and memory difficulties arising from sleep apnea."

Resources for Seniors

American Academy of Sleep Medicine:

<http://www.aasmnet.org>

National Sleep Foundation:

<http://www.sleepfoundation.org>

American Academy of Sleep Medicine resources for seniors and caregivers:

<http://www.aasmnet.org/links.aspx>

The link between sleep disturbances and dementia

Although the symptoms of lack of sleep can easily be mistaken for signs of dementia, ironically, research has indicated that sleep disturbances may actually be a *cause* of dementia. According to a [study conducted by David Holtzman](#), a neurologist at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, who tested the effects of chronic sleep deprivation on mice, "People who are chronically sleep deprived may have higher levels of amyloid-beta that make them more susceptible to Alzheimer's disease."

Holtzman's study, conducted at Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, further found that drugs that target orexin, a compound that regulates sleep and that plays a role in the sleep disorder narcolepsy, can possibly be useful in treating Alzheimer's patients. In the study, blocking orexin decreased the levels of amyloid-beta in sleep-deprived mice.

Applied to older adults, [Holtzman notes](#) that not only does the risk of Alzheimer's increase with age, the sleep/wake cycle also starts to break down, with older adults progressively getting less and less sleep. A [Reuter's article about the study](#) concludes that the findings of Holtzman's study "reinforce the need to treat sleep disorders, not only because they cause immediate problems, but because they may have a long-term impact on brain health."

Diagnosis of sleep disorders

Sleep disorders are especially difficult to diagnose in elderly patients. Loud snoring can be a clear sign of sleep apnea, but many older adults live alone — and if no one else hears the snoring, a senior's apnea can go undiagnosed. In addition, apnea in younger patients is often associated with obesity — but not so in older patients.

Treatment

Apnea is one of the most common sleep disorders in older adults. Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) is routinely used to treat sleep apnea. A study in the [Journal of the American Geriatrics Society](#) found that treatment of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) with CPAP in patients with Alzheimer's disease can improve cognitive function. In addition, a study in the [American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry](#) found that Alzheimer's patients with OSA can tolerate CPAP therapy and in fact benefit from its continued use.

Tips to improve quality of sleep

Seniors with sleep disturbances can [take steps on their own](#) to improve their quality of sleep.

- Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even on weekends.
- Limit naps to 20 minutes.
- Don't read, snack or watch TV in bed. Use the bedroom only for sleep.
- Avoid caffeine for about eight hours before bedtime.
- Avoid nicotine and alcohol in the evening. Although alcohol can cause drowsiness initially, it can also cause insomnia later.
- Don't stay in bed trying to go to sleep. Get up after 30 minutes and do something quiet in a different room.
- Consult a physician regarding medications that could interfere with sleep.
- Tell your physician about pain or other health problems that interfere with sleep.
- Exercise every day. Aerobic activity improves sleep.

Good sleep is essential to good health

Family, friends and those who work with seniors should consider a senior's lifestyle and health factors before making assumptions about their health. Seniors who display signs of confusion or decline in mental function should be asked about the quality of their sleep. Although it's difficult to know with any degree of certainty whether a senior's dementia symptoms are a result of sleep disturbances, good sleep is essential to good health, and older adults should take their sleep cycles seriously.

Lynn Schmidt is a Certified Senior Advisor (CSA) which has provided her with advanced knowledge and practice tools in the areas of key health issues as well as financial and social issues that are important to seniors. Lynn is eager to serve the tax, financial and family concerns of seniors at the highest level possible. When you work with a professional who has added the CSA designation to his or her achievements, you know you're working with someone who has invested the time and effort into learning about the things that are important to **you** or **your loved one**. For more information, please visit our website at www.LyncoFinancial.net