

~Joe has been having a hard time sleeping, so his doctor prescribes him some extra-strength sleeping pills which he takes on Sunday night. Joe wakes up in the morning before his alarm goes off, has time for breakfast and gets to work early. He tells his boss, "I didn't have any trouble at all getting up this morning!" His boss responds, "That is fine Joe, but where were you on Monday and Tuesday?" ~

Even after all of the advances that science and medicine have made, we cannot say for sure why we sleep and we don't even really know what sleep is for. The brain is not at rest during sleep, it stays active for most of the night.

There are two basic types of sleep: REM (random eye movement sleep) and non-REM sleep. During REM sleep the eyes are actually moving rapidly, and when the brain's waves are analyzed, they look very similar to the patterns of a person who is awake. During this time the mind is active but the brain is disconnected from the body, and the person is essentially paralyzed.

During REM sleep is when people are usually dreaming. Scientists think the brain is organizing and storing its memories during this time. This is an important part of sleep, and many things can affect your body's ability to get the REM sleep it needs. Some things that are harmful to REM sleep include alcohol, some anti-depressants, sedatives and, ironically enough, some sleeping medications.

Non-REM sleep is broken up into four different stages. Stage One is light sleep, with Four being the deepest type of sleep. The amount of sleep and the quality of sleep change as we age. The deep and most restful sleep decreases as we age, with more of the time of sleep spent in light sleep. This is why we more often and more easily awake during the night as we age.

Research has shown the average person needs about eight hours of sleep per night. However, there are differences among people and some only need four-six hours per night. It has been shown people who sleep less than four hours or more than 10 hours are usually less healthy than those who sleep a normal number of hours.

Sleep deprivation can add up, and missing one hour of sleep when compared to a normal night can decrease the mental capacity of the person. If one hour is lost per night, after one week the person has lost seven hours. This is basically the same as a person missing one night of sleep, and a person who has lost one hour per night, each night for a week will perform the same on mental tests as someone who did not sleep at all for one night.

Sleepy patients often report difficulty with performing mental tasks and they report short term memory loss. A sleep deprived person can have symptoms of anxiety or depression. They may have a bad mood, be irritable and have poor judgment.

Excessive sleepiness is the second leading cause of automobile accidents in the United States, and is the number one leading cause of truck accidents. The article next week will continue this topic and the treatments for insomnia.