

Sleep advice could be a crucial wake-up call

Blood test could help spot liver risks after overdose

HEALTH

with
Dr Zak
Uddin



With the clocks going back at the end of last month, Dr Zak Uddin examines sleep habits – a lifestyle decision that could be vitally important to your well being

It has often been said that the best things in life are free, and if this is to be believed, the evidence for getting a good night's sleep is very strong.

However, it seems we are a nation, if not a world of insomniacs, and with trouble sleeping currently being one of the leading reasons to consult a general practitioner, are we on the brink of an epidemic?

Insomnia itself is a fairly new concept. While certain famous leaders have proudly proclaimed to needing less than four hours sleep a night, until 50 years ago only a tiny minority of people were deliberately depriving themselves of sleep, defined as less than six hours a night.

However, a recent poll shows that half of people in the UK are now trying to get by on this or less. With the recommended amount being seven to eight hours a night, this may not seem like a big deal, but figures suggest that conditions associated with sleep loss cost the UK econo-



SLEEPING LIKE A BABY: Are you able to sleep like a baby? Or are you suffering from poor sleep? Good sleep habits are key to tackling sleep problems, writes Dr Zak Uddin
Picture: PA

my £30 billion every year.

The effects of even short term sleep deprivation are startling. One night of less than five hours is enough to reduce the performance of cells needed to clear cancer promoting cells from the body.

If you don't sleep for 19 hours, your judgement is impaired – similar to having consumed a large amount of alcohol.

In the short term, the body becomes less sensitive to its own insulin, causing a pre-diabetic state. The levels of hormones associated with

hunger and feeling full become altered and insomnia may cause an increased appetite and hence weight gain. Long term lack of sleep has been linked to several cancers and an increased risk of heart attack and stroke, especially in shift workers, who are unable to maintain a regular sleeping pattern.

MENTAL as well as physical health is affected by lack of sleep and while it was thought that low mood or anxiety caused sufferers to lay awake at night, it has

been shown that insomnia can induce symptoms from aggression all the way to suicidality.

If this is a wakeup call for you, the advice is refreshingly simple, and the answer to insomnia is not sleeping pills, but sleep itself.

Aim to go to bed at the same time each night, in a room where artificial or natural light is at a minimum.

You should try to limit any distractions; so if you are constantly disturbed by updates or texts on your phone, it may be better not to have it in the room.

Try to avoid caffeine in the few hours prior to sleep as it is a stimulant.

Excess alcohol may also disrupt your sleep.

Signs that you aren't getting enough rest, or that it is not of adequate quality are if you feel you could sleep through your alarm, or needing mid-afternoon caffeine to perk you up.

Ultimately, sleep is as important as any other part of your daily routine.

Useful websites
www.sleepeducation.org
www.sleepio.com

Health matters: Dr Zak answers your questions

Q I always had good skin in my teenage years, however, now I'm in my thirties I've started getting boils and redness on my cheeks and forehead, which is getting me down. Can adults get acne?
Stephanie, 35

A While people typically suffer with acne in their teenage years, due to the hormonal changes of puberty, acne can occur at any age.

What you are describing might also be Rosacea, another skin condition which causes symptoms similar to acne.

Importantly, both can be treated and if it is affecting your happiness, a routine appointment with your GP will

help to clarify the diagnosis as well as what can be done to help you.

Q Recently I have noticed that I get very anxious in social situations.

I used to be the life and soul of the party, but these days I find myself making excuses to stay at home
Robert, 69

A What you are describing sounds like social anxiety, and it seems that it is now having an impact on your ability to enjoy life.

While it may be limited to going out, social anxiety may also be a sign of underlying anxiety or low mood.

It would be useful to discuss your feelings with your regular doctor, who will be able to recommend treatments,

which may include counselling.

Do you have a question for Dr Zak? You can email him via askdoctorzak@gmail.com, visit the website doctorzak.co.uk or find him on Twitter @AskDoctorZak

Dr Uddin's advice is provided in good faith and in accordance with currently accepted evidence. However, this content is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. You should always seek the advice of a GP, or other qualified health provider, regarding a medical condition.



By Graeme Murray
Press Association

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PEOPLE who overdose on paracetamol could be helped by a blood test that shows immediately if they are going to suffer liver damage, according to researchers.

The test, which detects levels of specific molecules in blood, could help doctors identify which patients arriving in hospital need more intense treatment.

It will also help speed up the development of new therapies for liver damage by targeting patients most likely to benefit.

Three molecules in the blood associated with liver damage – miR-122, HMGB1 and FL-K18 – are detected by the test.

Previous studies have shown levels of these markers are elevated in the blood of patients with liver damage long before current tests can detect a problem.

A team led by the universities of Edinburgh and Liverpool measured levels in more than 1,000 patients across the UK who needed hospital treatment for paracetamol overdose.

Dr James Dear, of the University of Edinburgh, said: "Paracetamol overdose is very common and presents a large workload for already over-stretched emergency departments.

"These new blood tests can identify who will develop liver injury as soon as they first arrive at hospital. This could transform the care of this large, neglected, patient group."

Researchers found the test can accurately predict which patients are going to develop liver problems and who may need to be treated for longer before they are discharged.

It could also help identify patients who can be safely discharged after treatment. About 50,000 people are admitted to hospital each year in the UK due to paracetamol overdose. Scientists say people unknowingly take paracetamol at the same time as cold and flu medications that also contain the drug.

The study, published in the *Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, was funded by the Edinburgh and Lothians Health Foundation and the Medical Research Council.

Dr Daniel Antoine, who was based at the University of Liverpool during the study but is now at the University of Edinburgh, said: "This is an excellent example of scientists, clinicians and statisticians working together."