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Sleep complaints: Whenever possible, avoid the use of sleeping pills.

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Abstract

(1) Most sleep complaints involve difficulties in getting to sleep or staying asleep, or not feeling refreshed on awakening. Misconceptions and worrying over the lack of sleep and its consequences can contribute to reinforcing these disorders; (2) How can patients who complain of poor-quality sleep be helped, without resorting to treatments that can have adverse effects? To answer this question, we conducted a systematic review of the literature based on the standard *Prescrire* procedure; (3) One effective approach is to explain the basic physiology of sleep, to discuss misconceptions, and to adopt a strategy of "stimulus control". This method has a similar efficacy to prescribing a benzodiazepine. and the effect is longer lasting; (4) Moderate, regular physical exercise, especially in the morning, seems to help some patients, but the evidence is weak; (5) Some clinical trials of phytotherapy have shown a positive risk-benefit balance of weak aqueous or hydroalcoholic valerian extracts. Efficacy is limited, however; (6) A meta-analysis of placebo-controlled trials showed that benzodiazepines and related drugs increase the duration of sleep and help patients to fall asleep sooner. However, none of these trials provides comparative data spanning periods of more than two weeks. Efficacy is uncertain in the longer term, as patients quickly develop a tolerance to the hypnotic effects of benzodiazepines; (7) The adverse effects of benzodiazepines include frequent memory disorders, daytime drowsiness, falls, fractures and road accidents, and a withdrawal syndrome after treatment cessation. Related drugs such as zolpidem and zopiclone provoke similar adverse effects; (8) Sedative antihistamines have not been as well-evaluated as benzodiazepines in this setting. Small comparative trials of doxylamine and diphenhydramine showed no major difference in efficacy versus benzodiazepines and related drugs. The main adverse effects of sedative antihistamines are daytime drowsiness and altered vigilance, and atropinic effects; (9) Case-control studies showed a statistical link between benzodiazepine use in early pregnancy and birth defects such as cleft lip. In contrast, data on the use of doxylamine during pregnancy are reassuring; (10) Other sedative psychotropics have not been adequately tested in this setting or have been shown to have a negative risk-benefit balance; (11) In practice, patients who complain of poor-quality sleep should be given appropriate information on the mechanisms of normal sleep and related misconceptions, on the best methods for getting to sleep, and on the dangers of sedative psychotropics (dependence, withdrawal syndrome). When prescribing or dispensing a benzodiazepine to a woman of child-bearing age, the risk of birth defects, although not clearly demonstrated, must be mentioned.

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