



Headache Wellness Center

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Sleep and Headache

Sleep patterns are closely related to headaches. Both are controlled by the same neurotransmitter (serotonin). Both seem to be regulated in a deep area of the brain called the “brainstem.” Furthermore, sleep is an excellent method of stopping a headache. Insomnia and worsening of headaches seem to parallel each other; headaches seldom get better if the sleep pattern does not improve.

Typically, the normal sleep pattern consists of 4-6 ninety-minute sleep cycles. These consist of four quiet and one active (REM) stages.

Either too much sleep or too little sleep may trigger the onset of a headache. Workers who switch shifts or have interrupted sleep are likely to develop headache problems. Irregular sleep hours may increase the frequency of headaches. The following recommendations are to improve sleep hygiene and thus improve headache control.

- Follow regular sleep hours, even on weekends. Staying up late or awakening late on weekends may trigger headaches. Same wake time is particularly important.
- Improve your sleep environment. Your bedroom should be dark, quiet (mechanical noises may mask more irregular disruptive noises) and cool (about 65 degrees).
- Get enough sleep. We recommend 7-8 hours per night.
- Use your bedroom for sleep (not solving problems, reading, watching TV, etc.).
- Avoid having children or pets sleep with you.
- Prepare for sleep: take a warm bath, listen to quiet music, drink a glass of milk.
- Eliminate stimulants such as caffeine and nicotine
- Eliminate alcohol before bedtime.
- No naps during the day.
- Exercise regularly, but not before bedtime.
- If your provider suspects sleep apnea, raise head of bed and sleep on your side.

If you have difficulty breathing, choking spells, or loud snoring during sleep, please bring this to our attention. If you continue to have a sleep disturbance we may use headache medications which act on brain chemistries in such a way as to promote both sleep and reduce headaches.