Menopause and Sleep

by AFRA WILLMORE

Sleeping Well Despite Menopause

Sleep. Remember that? Remember the evenings when you would side beneath cool sheets and close your eyes, waiting for the blissful oblivion of eight hours of unconsciousness, before waking for a new day refreshed and filled with vigor?

Yes there were nights when illness, small children or partners with a twinkle in their eye might interrupt your normal routine, but never before have you woken in the night feeling like the cleansing towel they hand you after dinner at a restaurant – hotter than the sun and wringing wet!

When my sleep patterns first started changing I did not associate it with the menopause. I would start off cold, then throw the covers back, tossing and turning with a fevered brow. I found I would have to get up, splash water on my face then creep back and try my hardest to lie still so as not to disturb my other half. Apart from anything else, my libido disappeared with the first signs of menopause so nighttime athletics were the last thing I fancied!

It was only when I confessed to a female friend that I was struggling with night after night of disturbed sleep that she admitted she too suffered – turns out it's yet another menopause thing. Some women wake suddenly in the night for no apparent reason, some are woken by hot flashes, palpitations or night time sweating and some just can't fall asleep in the first place.

According to the American National Sleep Foundation a staggering 61 per cent of menopausal women suffer sleep problems. Anyone making menopause products? I'd hit Twitter in the middle of the night for maximum impact if I were you!

But why?

It's once again down to the diminishing quantities of estrogen and progesterone during perimenopause and menopause. These low hormone levels cause the hot flushes and sweating that are usually the cause of menopausal insomnia.

Next page: tips for sleeping better.

Tips for Sleeping Better

The good news is there are measures you can take to minimize the impact of disturbed nights caused by menopause:

- **Don't nap –** Don't be tempted to try and catch up with your lost sleep during the day. You need to be tired to get a good nights sleep.

- **Exercise –** Try and get some exercise every day. I'm not suggesting all menopausal women should become gym bunnies, but try walking a bit further and faster every day. Or try stepping up and down the bottom step of the stairs in your home for five minutes, or take the stairs instead of the elevator at the office or at the mall for a good workout. Whatever exercise you choose make sure it's not last thing at night- a good excuse to give the night-time aerobics class a miss! The latest you should exercise is two to three hours before bedtime.
- **Avoid alcohol before bed –** Alcohol will help you fall asleep and it might seem like a good idea to have a relaxing glass of wine in the evening to help you drop off **–** but it's not. It won't be the right sort of sleep and you could find yourself waking later in the night. Try a glass of milk, warm or cold, instead before bed. Milk contains a substance which can help you relax and along with a warm bath or shower it might just do the trick if getting to sleep in the first place is hard for you.

- **Avoid nicotine and caffeine –** You should avoid nicotine throughout the day, too, and choose caffeine free beverages.
- **Use your bed only for sleeping –** Experts advise not to read, use your laptop, tablet or phone, or watch TV in bed. Now that's a hard one for me. I find reading makes me sleepy so maybe it's a case of being careful in your choice of reading material. And as for the phone – well I've been known to get up in the night to fetch it if I've left it downstairs but I'm passing the advice on in the hope you have more willpower than I do!
- **Go natural –** Wear natural fabrics in bed and use bedding made from natural fabrics too.
- **Cool and dark –** Keep your bedroom dark and cool and try and stick to a regular nightime routine - yes, treat yourself like a baby and hopefully you'll sleep like the proverbial infant!

Other Considerations

I've seen it written that you should not resort to sleeping tablets for menopause related insomnia but I know many people do buy over the counter aids which should do no harm for occasional use. Check with your pharmacist to make sure anything you buy over the counter is suitable for you and won't interact with any prescription drugs you take.

Of course HRT can help with many symptoms which cause menopausal issues during the day as well as at night – chat to your healthcare provider about whether some form of hormone replacement might suit you. No-one will force you to start a drug regime but at least you will know what choices you have available to you.

Bear in mind that many different medical conditions can cause sleeping issues and night-time problems like restless leg syndrome, certain medications, depression, high blood pressure, asthma and heart disease so if you're regularly being disturbed at night with any symptoms you should pay your doctor a visit. Even if you are a healthcare worker it's never wise to self-diagnose so get checked out.