

CAN MENOPAUSE CONTRIBUTE TO SLEEP PROBLEMS?

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Sleep-related problems in women increase with menopause. In fact, 50 to 80 percent of menopausal women have problems with sleep. There are numerous changes that occur in a woman physiologically during this time which have sleep-related consequences.

First are the obvious hormonal changes, such as decreases in production of estrogen, progesterone and androgens. There are numerous sleep-promoting areas in the brain that are affected by estrogen: the cortex, hypothalamus, and pituitary gland to name a few. In addition, there are decreases in growth hormone and prolactin, which promote deep sleep. Conversely, cortisol - a hormone that disturbs sleep - increases with menopause.

One of the first things that has been observed specifically during menopause with regards to sleep is an increase in insomnia. In fact, 25 percent of all menopausal women complain of insomnia. The type of insomnia most frequently reported is an inability to stay asleep, and the most common symptom responsible for insomnia is hot flashes. They are described as a short and intense feeling of increased heat, followed by sweating and shivering. The hot flashes are precipitated by an increase in body temperature during sleep. This is then followed by excessive vasodilatation of small blood vessels in the skin, which results in the sweating and shivering. These symptoms cause repeated arousals from sleep; some so brief as not to be remembered the next day. Sleep becomes fragmented and non-restorative. The result is fatigue, sleepiness, irritability and difficulty with concentrating. If left untreated, hot flashes are gone in the



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majority of women within three years. However, up to nine percent, will have them persist beyond the age of 70.

A second sleep-related disorder seen in menopause is the increased incidence of sleep apnea. Nocturnal breathing problems, characterized by intermittent airway closure, increase with menopause. There may be many factors, but a redistribution of fat and a loss of progesterone seems to be the key factor. There is an increased deposition of body fat centrally with menopause, including the respiratory airway. This results in a narrowing of the air passage, which predisposes the woman to obstructive breathing during her sleep. Progesterone, on the other hand, is a respiratory stimulant and increases muscle tone in the airway. With the absence of progesterone in postmenopausal women, the airway is more likely to collapse during the sleep cycle.

A further problem in diagnosing sleep apnea in women is that the presentation may be different from that in men. Although snoring, daytime sleepiness, and fatigue are also present in women as in men, women seem to have an increased

incidence of morning headaches and depression as a result of sleep-disordered breathing. Therefore, sleep apnea should be a major consideration in postmenopausal women who are presenting with these symptoms for the first time.

Other disorders that can disturb sleep that can be concurrent with menopause, but not necessarily directly related, include:

- Restless Leg Syndrome,
- Mood Disorders, such as depression and generalized anxiety disorder
- Medication side effects
- Fibromyalgia
- Cardiac and Pulmonary diseases

Many of these disorders are more age-related than hormonal.

Sleep disturbances in menopausal woman is a major problem. However, there are many treatment options available. We have excellent therapies for hot flashes, sleep apnea, and insomnia. Examples include hormone replacement therapy, antidepressants, natural estrogens found in plants for hot flashes. We have sleep hygiene, behavioral therapy and safe medications for insomnia. As for sleep apnea, there are numerous types of devices that apply positive pressure to the airway and prevent it from collapsing during sleep. The important point is to discuss your problems with your physician or health care provider. There is no reason why women today have to suffer these discomforts, and predispose themselves to secondary diseases the way their mothers and grandmothers did in their times.

For more information, please call the Sleep Disorders Center of Prescott Valley at (928)772-6422, or stop by the office at 3259 Windsong Drive, or visit us online at www.pvsleep.com.