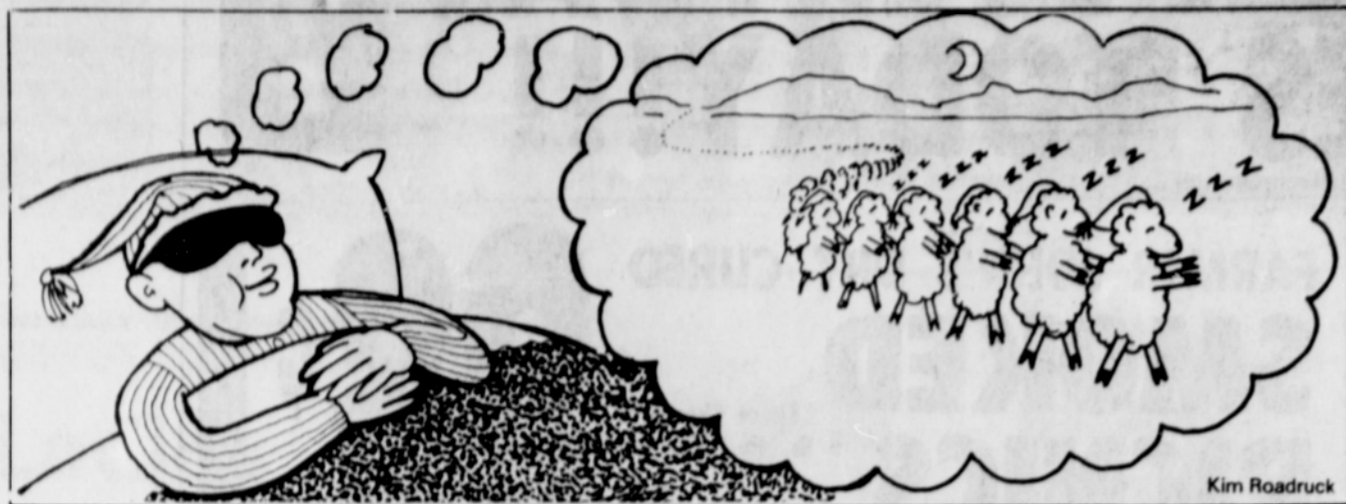


Sleeping pills are the worst remedy for insomnia



by Michael Castleman,
Pacific News Service

After aspirin, sleeping pills are the most widely used drugs in the United States. At a cost of more than \$175 million, over 1 billion sleeping pills are swallowed every year, enough theoretically to put every man, woman and child in the nation to sleep for 200 hours.

Although Americans of all ages take sleeping pills, two-thirds of sleeping pill prescriptions are written for people over 45. Surprisingly, less than 20 per cent of these prescriptions are written for people with specifically sleep-related problems. According to one U.S. government study, doctors give about 30 per cent of sleeping pill prescriptions to patients with psychological problems, 25 per cent to those with identifiable medical ailments and about 18 per cent to others with vague, poorly defined symptoms.

Indeed, Medical Self-Care magazine reports that an estimated 50 per cent of all hospital patients receive sleeping pills routinely every night, whether or not they have trouble sleeping; more than one-fifth of those who become addicted to sleeping pills acquire their drug habit in hospitals.

For those who suffer insomnia, sleeping pills do work—but only for a short time. The effective use of most such medications lasts less than a week. The longest-working sleeping pill, Dalmane (flurazepam), appears to be effective for no more than one month.

Sleeping pills distort sleep more than they induce it. Researchers have found that about half of those who take sleeping pills for insomnia wind up with even worse sleeping problems as a result. More striking yet, withdrawal from sleeping pills has been proven to cure about 20 per cent of insomniacs.

Sleeping pills are also the third most common means of committing suicide; moreover, they are implicated in about 30 per cent of all drug-related deaths. Although the newer pills appear to be less dangerous than barbituates, they are potentially hazardous when mixed with alcohol, or accessible to children.

Thus, almost everyone would probably be better off not using sleeping pills, but certain people should never use them:

- Those with lung diseases or chronic breathing problems, including snoring. Sleeping pills can interfere with the body's ability to breathe normally.

- Those with impaired liver or kidney functions. A sleeping medication must pass through these organs, and tends to remain in the body longer if they are impaired.

- Those taking other medications. Sleeping pills can interact harmfully—even fatally—with other drugs.

- Pregnant women. Sleeping pills can affect unborn children. Thalidomide, which caused severe limb deformities in many children of women who took it while pregnant, was an over-the-counter sedative.

- Anyone who has been drinking. Alcohol and sleeping pills add to each other's respiratory depression effects, and may cause death.

"Insomnia" in itself is not a disease. It is a symptom, like a runny nose. The term is also quite vague, used to describe any or all of the following complaints: inability to fall asleep or to stay asleep without difficulty; excessive daytime sleepiness; and general dissatisfaction with the quality of sleep. Many people who have problems sleeping are actually in good physical and mental shape.

Here are some ways that may alleviate insomnia without medication:

- If you take unnecessary naps during the day, work to eliminate them, because they tend to disrupt sleep later at night. If you must go to bed and get up at irregular hours, try to arrange your day so there is some quiet time during the hour or

so before you retire.

- There's good reason to count sheep—repetitive visualization activities distract the brain from more sleep-disruptive thoughts. Other rituals that might help include taking a warm bath or shower, listening to music or watching TV.

- If you are a worrier, take a "worry walk" in the evening, or make a list of what you need to do the next day before you go to bed. Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation or biofeedback can also help.

- When a big meal before bedtime

keeps you awake, a small glass of wine or brandy may help you get to sleep. (Larger amounts of alcohol, however, disrupt sleep and cause morning hangovers.) Warm milk and chamomile tea are effective non-alcoholic nightcaps.

Strenuous exercise during the day helps many people fall asleep more easily and deeply. But don't exercise vigorously right before bed; a hard physical workout tends to heighten alertness.

- Caffeine, the powerful, physically addictive drug found in coffee, many soft drinks and teas, choco-

late and some over-the-counter drugs, contributes to a substantial number of sleep problems. The nicotine in tobacco products has also been shown to be associated with insomnia, as are many other drugs.

If you do take sleeping pills and would like to stop using them, don't do it without medical supervision. Certain kinds of sleep medication, for example barbituates, may cause serious withdrawal reactions. Contact local drug help or mental health authorities for an appropriate referral.

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