

Melatonin: Put Your Concern To Rest

Knowing when to and when not to use a melatonin supplement may help you get some shuteye.

Even though you can buy melatonin in any drug store, your body has been producing it all along. Our bodies secrete this natural hormone to prepare our brain for sleep. Along with body temperature, it's one of the main regulators of your circadian clock. If the supplement is natural, safe, and inexpensive, shouldn't it be part of your bedtime routine?

Not necessarily. "Many people take very high doses of melatonin 20 minutes before bedtime, thinking it will help them sleep. When used that way, melatonin is not effective for maintaining sleep throughout the night," says Dr. Carlos Torre, a sleep medicine specialist at the University of Miami Health System.

Making the most of melatonin

According to Dr. Torre, melatonin works best when taken in a 1-3 milligram dose two or three hours before bed. "It's useful when you need to adjust to changes, such as jet lag or the biannual time change," Dr. Torre says. It also helps night owls doze off earlier so they can wake earlier the next morning, when necessary. Since we produce less of this natural hormone as we age, it benefits some older adults as well.

The sleep aid falls short for chronic insomnia sufferers, however. "It's not effective for maintaining sleep. If you wake often during the night or feel exhausted every morning, see a sleep specialist. They can diagnose circadian clock disorders, sleep apnea, or other problems disrupting your rest," Dr. Torre says.

Many sleep aids – whether natural or prescription – cause unpleasant or harmful side effects. As a natural hormone, melatonin is safe, though some people experience headaches and excessive drowsiness while taking it.

What is good sleep hygiene?

Dr. Torre suggests adopting these habits to improve your nightly rest:

- Get sunlight exposure during the day.
- Exercise regularly, though not close to bedtime.
- Keep your bedroom cool and dark.
- Stay off computers and cell phones in the evening. Bright light decreases melatonin production.
- Avoid heavy meals late at night.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol if you find yourself wakeful at night.
- Skip the nap if it interferes with your sleep.
- Manage your stress levels.

To learn more about sleep medicine, call 305-243-ZZZZ (9999).

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