



By Katherine Ladny Mitchell

# Sleep and Aging

Many people assume older adults simply need less sleep than young adults. However, the National Institute on Aging reports that both age groups need between 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Unfortunately, many seniors find it difficult to get adequate rest. They may struggle with daytime fatigue, feelings of depression, difficulty focusing or remembering, a higher risk of falling at night, and may purchase more sleep medications as a result of their restlessness. While sleeping patterns do change with age, several conditions and lifestyle habits can complicate getting a good night's rest. Here we'll look at how sleep changes, what factors can disrupt sleep, and tips for sleeping more soundly as you age.

## How Sleep Changes with Age

Sleep can be divided into two primary types: REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is the sleep when people typically dream, and light and deep stages of non-

REM sleep. People rest best during the deep stages of non-REM sleep. But as people age, their non-REM sleep pattern includes less deep sleep and more light sleep. As lighter sleepers, older adults may be more alert to

disruptions in their environment and experience abrupt transitions between sleep and wakefulness. As a result, some may feel less rested even if their total amount of sleep stays the same.

Older adults also tend to go to bed earlier at night and wake up earlier in the morning, a sleep pattern shift known as "advanced sleep phase syndrome." Many may have more difficulty falling asleep and more sleep interruptions, often due to the need to use the restroom, pain from chronic conditions, anxiety, and side effects from certain medications.

## Why Sleep Patterns Change

Researchers are still studying possible explanations for these sleep pattern shifts. One explanation concerns changes in the circadian biological clock – the body's 24-hour rhythm which responds to sunlight and governs our temperature and hormone levels (including those affecting sleep). As a person ages, this circadian biologic clock can start acting differently. According to Dr. Michael Crowe, the on-site physician at Life Care Center of Collegedale, lack of sunshine and fresh air could be where the problem lies. "A lot of people don't get outside enough. The pineal gland makes

melatonin, which resets our 24-hour cycle. If you don't get outside, your pineal gland doesn't know what time of day it is, and that can cause trouble getting to sleep at night."

Sleep pattern changes often occur in women who are going through or who have experienced menopause, as they have lower levels of the sleep-inducing hormones progesterone and estrogen than premenopausal women. Some researchers believe older adults also produce less melatonin, a sleep-inducing hormone that is typically released at night. This decrease in melatonin may cause sleep problems, but other researchers think there is little significant

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– Dr. Michael Crowe





**Michael Crowe, DO**  
 Life Care  
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difference in melatonin levels. Stacy Hill, a registered nurse and the executive director of The Lantern at Morning Pointe of Collegedale, explains that a lack of cognitive stimulation could be the cause of many older adults’ restless nights. “If you don’t exercise the brain during the day, then it’s not tired when it’s time to go to sleep. We encourage seniors to stay stimulated throughout the day.” Dr. Crowe agrees. “The best thing to do is physical exercise to wear yourself out a little bit,” he says.

Underlying Problems

As people age, they may develop chronic medical problems, and these, in turn, can interfere with sleep. Here are some of the most common underlying sleep problems.

**INSOMNIA** is a widespread sleeping problem among older adults, keeping people from both falling asleep and sleeping soundly. According to a National Sleep Foundation poll, 44% of older adults deal with symptoms of nighttime insomnia more than once a week. Certain medications, sickness, anxiety, consuming alcohol and caffeine, and even smoking can contribute to insomnia.

**SNORING** is also a disruptive sleep problem affecting about 90 million Americans. Snoring is more prevalent among overweight persons and can become more of a problem with age. Snoring loudly may also indicate a more serious problem – sleep apnea.

**SLEEP APNEA** is a condition in which a person stops breathing for several seconds while sleeping. The body then awakens slightly to draw breath, thus disrupting sleep cycles and making rest more elusive. People with untreated sleep apnea have a higher risk of high blood pressure, memory problems, and stroke. According to Dr. Crowe, excessive tiredness during the daytime could be an indicator of sleep apnea.



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Movement Disorders

According to the National Sleep Foundation, approximately 10% of North Americans and Europeans experience restless legs syndrome (RLS). A neurological disorder, RLS causes people to experience an unpleasant, tingling sensation that makes them want to move or kick their legs. Many with RLS also have a similar condition called periodic limb movement disorder (PLMD). PLMD makes people jerk their legs frequently – sometimes hundreds of times – while sleeping.

Mood Issues

Hill believes that depression could be an underlying problem for many older adults. “I think an overlooked issue for older adults with sleeping problems is depression. They’re oftentimes suffering from the loss of identity, a spouse, or their role in life. These traumatic life events can lead to depression and can upset their sleep-wake patterns.”

How to Sleep Better as you Age

While sleep pattern shifts and various conditions can make getting a good night’s



**Stacy Hill, RN**  
 Executive  
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rest more challenging as people mature, there are several tips that can help older adults sleep more soundly.

- Develop a regular sleep routine with the same bedtime each night and time to get up each morning.
- Dr. Crowe suggests staying away from stimulants such as nicotine, alcohol, and caffeine in the hours before you sleep.
- Hill recommends keeping a journal of sleep disturbances or times you awake in the middle of the night, as this can help your doctor determine how to help.
- Avoid taking naps more than 20 minutes long.

- Moderately exercise during the afternoon hours. “Make sure exercise is done early in the day so that you don’t wire your brain back up before sleep,” recommends Dr. Crowe.
- Make your sleeping environment comfortable, quiet, and dark.
- Drink less before bed to keep nighttime bathroom trips to a minimum.
- Consider having a light snack (such as warm milk) before bedtime.
- Leave your bedroom if you cannot fall asleep after 20 minutes, as your bedroom is your sleeping room. Return when you feel drowsy.

Talk to your doctor to see if any underlying problems may be interfering with your rest if your typical night’s sleep is not satisfactory. According to Dr. Crowe, medications are often found to be a contributing factor to sleepless nights. “Consult your doctor for a medication review if you’re having insomnia,” he recommends. While aging can affect sleep patterns, a good night’s rest is never too far out of reach. **HS**



# Living well today, preventing strokes tomorrow

By Mary Beth Callahan, Life Care Public Relations

**T**he facts are staggering: according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, strokes are the leading cause of serious, long-term adult disability and the fourth leading cause of death in the United States. Approximately 795,000 strokes will occur this year alone, killing approximately 130,000 people.

There is good news. Eighty percent of strokes are preventable, according to the National Stroke Association. Living a healthy and active lifestyle significantly reduces your risk for a stroke and allows you a higher quality life.

Reducing your risk of stroke gives you more energy and enhances your ability to enjoy activities such as traveling, volunteering and spending time with family. Your wallet will thank you, too. With the cost of health care on the rise, maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle may also aid in reducing medical expenses.

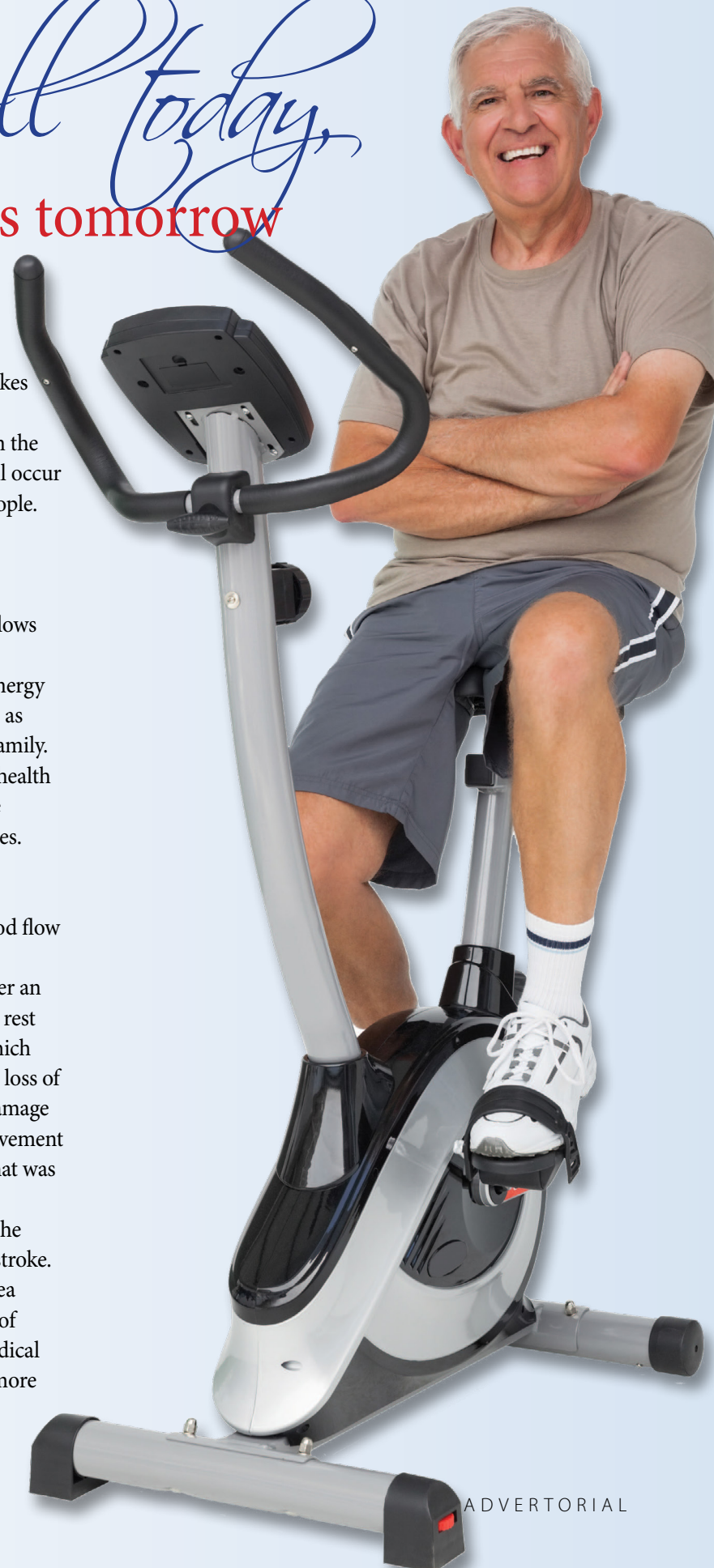
## WHAT IS A STROKE?

A stroke is a brain attack that cuts off vital blood flow and oxygen to the brain.

When a stroke occurs, a blood clot blocks either an artery (which carries blood from the heart to the rest of the body) or a blood vessel (a tube through which the blood moves through the body). The result is loss of brain cells and brain damage. Soon after brain damage occurs, abilities such as speech, memory and movement are lost, depending on the portion of the brain that was affected.

The outcome for stroke patients varies due to the amount of brain damage that occurs during the stroke.

"Time is an important factor," stated Dr. Andrea Bowers, an on-site physician at Life Care Center of Cleveland. "The more quickly a patient seeks medical attention and can get into a rehab program, the more quickly a patient will recover."



## HOW CAN I PREVENT ONE?

A stroke can happen to anyone at any time, regardless of age, sex or race. While most strokes can be prevented, the key is knowing how to do so.

The following list isn't comprehensive, but these tips could help save you or a loved one's life.

- **Control your blood pressure.** Hypertension, also known as high blood pressure, is the leading cause of a stroke. You can lower or maintain your blood pressure by eating healthy and being active. Having lower blood pressure will also aid in preventing heart disease, diabetes and kidney failure. Talk with your health care provider to determine the best method of controlling your blood pressure.
- **Check your pulse.** Having atrial fibrillation, an abnormal heart rhythm, causes blood to clot in the heart and can lead to a stroke. Your doctor can detect AF by carefully checking your pulse. Visit your doctor to check for AF or to learn how to manage it.
- **Know your cholesterol number.** High cholesterol clogs arteries in the heart and can lead to a stroke or heart disease. Your cholesterol can be lowered with diet and exercise; medication can also be prescribed by your doctor.
- **Be active.** You don't have to be an Olympian or marathon runner to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Exercising for as little as 30 minutes a day will improve your overall health. Take a walk, go for a swim or dance to your favorite tunes. Enjoy the benefits of being active, while reducing your risk for a stroke.
- **Quit smoking.** Cigarette smoking doubles your risk for a stroke. Nicotine increases the buildup of fatty acids in the arteries and may cut off blood supply to the brain. Talk with your doctor to learn how to quit smoking and reduce your risk for other health concerns such as lung disease, heart disease and cancer.
- **Control diabetes.** This disorder not only affects blood sugar, or glucose levels, but also damages blood vessels throughout the body. If blood sugar levels are high during a stroke, brain damage can be significantly greater. Learning to control diabetes will improve your overall health.

## THE WARNING SIGNS OF A STROKE INCLUDE SUDDEN:

- Confusion
- Trouble speaking
- Loss of balance
- Severe headache
- Trouble seeing
- Numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body

## WHEN SHOULD I SEE A DOCTOR?

Seek medical attention immediately if you or someone else experiences stroke symptoms.

Recognizing the signs of a stroke and acting **FAST** can save a life and reduce brain damage.

**Face:** Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face seem to droop?

**Arms:** Ask the person to raise both arms in the air. Does one arm droop downward?

**Speech:** Ask the person to speak. Is the person able to clearly communicate, or is his or her speech slurred?

**Time:** If a person experiences any of these signs, call 9-1-1 and seek immediate medical attention.

"Sometimes, people wait too long when they start experiencing symptoms of a stroke," said Amanda Ross, assistant director of rehabilitation at Life Care Center of East Ridge. "Getting to a hospital quickly at the onset of symptoms is vital."

After a patient seeks medical attention, the next step is rehabilitation to regain abilities lost during a stroke.

Physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists help patients regain as many physical abilities lost as possible.

## MORE RESOURCES...

- Your primary care physician
- Your local stroke association
- American Stroke Association ([www.strokeassociation.org](http://www.strokeassociation.org))
- Local health fairs
- National Stroke Association ([www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org))
- CDC ([www.cdc.gov/stroke](http://www.cdc.gov/stroke))
- WebMD ([www.webmd.com/stroke](http://www.webmd.com/stroke))

Life Care Centers of America 