



Healthbeat: Sleeping Pills Can Lead to Addiction

ABC News

Women are more prone to sleep problems, with menstruation, pregnancy and menopause all potentially disruptive to a good night's rest.

Sleep aids are providing relief, but there is concern about addiction.

Alessandra Rain started taking prescription sleeping pills after a bad car wreck and failed marriage.

Soon she was hooked, taking dozens of sleep medications every month, mixing them with pills for pain and depression.

"That little innocent sleeping pill became something that was quite dangerous and nearly took my life," Rain said. "If it can happen to someone like me, it can happen to anyone"

It's tales like Rain's that have many women torn about when to turn to sleep aids.

Thirty-three-year-old Terri Dunavant is a single mom trying to juggle it all and make a good life for her and her son.

"I try to be the super woman the super everything," Dunavant said. "I try to make everything smooth, everyone happy, except for me. That's why I don't sleep.

"It's hard for my brain to just kind of stop spinning. I was just overwhelmed of some much pressure and activities."

She was having trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. Her doctor suggested sleeping pills and that concerned her.

"I didn't want to get addicted to it or anything like that."

A study by the National Sleep Foundation finds 30 percent of American women use some sort of sleep aid at least a few times a week.

The medications can be effective at ending sleep problems short term, but overuse can lead to trouble.

"The reality is that many of these women are using those medications much more long term, months to years," said psychologist Kimberly Kirkpatrick Justice, Ph.D.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends using hypnotics such as Ambien, Lunesta or Sonata only once or twice a week for a few weeks.

New worries were raised this week when a controversial report found a possible link between sleeping pills and deaths, but the study did not find the deaths were caused by the medicine.

Dr. Barbara Soltes at Rush University Medical Center says newer prescription sleep aids are safe if given to the right person for a short period of time.

"The key is we want to find the underlying problem," she said. "We don't want to just put a band aid on it by given them a sleep aid."

Soltes said the key is to find the cause and physicians need to ask in-depth questions. While medications can help in the short term, behavioral changes can also be very effective.

Stay off the computer, iPad and smart phone and also turn off the TV and try not to think about your problems at bedtime.

"I do see more stressors," Soltes said. "I see more health-related issues in younger women that I didn't see years ago and it has to be the environment we are living in now."

For Rain, rehabilitation was the answer. She now runs a non-profit to help others overcome their prescription addictions.

Terri Dunavant is working closely with Dr. Soltes and taking Lunesta occasionally. She's no longer worried about addiction.

"I haven't been taking it every night," Dunavant said. "I'm doing other alternatives. I'm writing lists down, keeping a journal, just something to ease my mind."

Getting back to a normal, restful sleep cycle can take time, but doctors say it's worth the effort since sleep deprivation is associated with an increased risk of high blood pressure, weight gain, depression and more.

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