Doc’s Spoonful of Medicine

#14. When problems arise, Fletton-folk, may “SLEEP on it” to find the best solutions!

Sleep knows no social status, age, race, colour, religion, or political persuasion (in many ways, not even species). It is one of the commonest unifying phenomena amongst creatures of Planet Earth. Sleep has many functions, including the repair of minor, or major damage to tissues, the analysis, and organisation of information from the day (from all of our senses). The rest, during even light (“doze”) or brief (“nap”) sleep, helps to restore our energy, well-being, happiness, and motivation. Sleep helps us to forget adverse events and disturbing thoughts. During rapid growth, teenagers produce more growth hormone during sleep than when awake. No wonder, seemingly unrelated observations, like, “my teenager sleeps all the time” and “my child grew 4 inches between two school years”, come together unannounced, like thunder and lightning. Let babies, sleep. They need it to grow and develop. Even sleeping dogs are allowed to lie, so that we can live in peace!

There are two main types of sleep, occurring in cycles every 90 minutes or so, 4 to 6 times a night. The “Non-Rapid Eye Movement” (Non-REM) sleep which starts the cycle is the bit we all wish would feel as if it lasts much longer. During this phase, body temperature, blood pressure, heart rate all fall, the brain uses less energy and displays slow electrical waves. This is “deep sleep”, and this part of the sleep cycle nearly always lasts much longer that the “Rapid Eye movement” (REM) type of sleep, though it does not seem so, to many of us. How CAN you know how long a period of relative unconsciousness lasts?

Paradoxically, during REM sleep, there are fast brain waves, rapid movements of the eyes, a rise in the heart rate, but loss of muscle tone and suspension of many internal body regulating reactions. It is during REM sleep that dreams, and nightmares occur. Most people do not actually remember most of their dreams, but we remember some, and doing so can make you think that you “have not slept at all”! This is magnified by the fact that intermittent wakening is natural, to survey surroundings, and confirm safety from danger or predators. It happens 1%-2% of the first 90 minutes of sleep, increasing in frequency to 12%-14% of the last 90 minutes of sleep. Wakening happens during, or at the end of REM sleep, often during dreams, hence why you remember some dreams and nightmares. If you are anxious, or have a lot on your mind, you have more “wakening time”.

Falling asleep and waking are mediated by two hormones, Melatonin and Cortisol respectively, influenced by the biological time clock known as the “circadian rhythm”. This is determined by sunrise and sunset light levels hitting the back of the eyes and sending messages to the brain. Did you know that the eyes are on stalks directly attached to the brain?

That’s all very well, Doc, but have you got any tips, since you are not going to prescribe me “sleeping tablets”, that I can become dependent on, or addicted to, or look for, in order to use as an overdose, in a low moment or a situational life crisis? Well, YES! Do…Go to bed and get up from bed at roughly the same respective times every day, no matter what (shift pattern work to earn a crust, excepted). We know that most of us cope even after a restless night. Get regular uninterrupted gentle exercise at a pace appropriate to your age and health, such as walking, cycling, swimming, or jogging, but never close to bedtime. It takes about 3 hours for the blood pressure to fall to sleep levels, after exercise. Keep the bedroom cool (not cold or hot), quiet and dark. Don’t watch or do mentally stimulating things close to bedtime. The exception is natural “intimate” activity, which releases relaxing hormones afterwards. Remember that caffeine has a “half-life of about 8 hours”, meaning that your “cuppa” is still half as active at “giving you a buzz” 8 hours after the last sip or glug. And that bedtime “fag”? Nicotine is a potent stimulant. Surely just a wee dram afore ye go? Alcohol shortens the sleep cycle, so it may sedate you initially, but you soon wake up to wonder if you finished the bottle. It is also very habit forming and addiction to alcohol often starts during times of insomnia and disturbed sleep. Let’s not mention alcoholic liver failure or its clear link to many cancers, if used daily without “dry days” for detoxification.

No, many natural herbs and vegetables promote sleep, including lettuce (wow, really?!), camomile, valerian, fennel, nutmeg and ashwagandha. These can be used in drinks or food, or as non-addictive herbal capsule sleep aids. Yawn…Since reading and quiet music are conducive to sleep, I think you must by now, be ready for me to wish you “Night, Night” Dear Fletton-folk.