Good Night, Sleep Tight

Dim the lights, lower the shades, breathe deeply and slide under the covers. It's bedtime. But as your body begins to relax, your mind starts to race. Did you get everything done today? What's in store for tomorrow?

Meanwhile, your eyes get adjusted to the dark. Before you know it, you are wide-awake. Sleep? No way -- there's too much to think about.

Insomnia, trouble falling asleep or trouble sleeping, is a growing problem in the United States. Studies show that many Americans don't get enough sleep because of stress, anxiety and bad sleep habits. Sure, a presentation or an interview the next day can make you toss and turn. But if insomnia lasts more than a week, or if you often experience daytime sleepiness, call your doctor. In most cases, you can put your sleeplessness to rest with good sleep habits.

How Much Is Enough?

Medical experts suggest anywhere say 6-8 hours for adults and up to 10 hours for children and adolescents. But according to the National Sleep Foundation, one in three adults gets six hours of sleep or less. How do you know if you're getting enough sleep? Listen to your body. Falling asleep at a symphony or at the movies isn't necessarily a sign that the event is boring. It's a sign that you're not getting enough sleep.

Don't Skip Sleep

With increasing activities, many people stay awake into the early hours of the morning. Most people think that sleep is easy to give up. They don't realize the negative effects that cutting down on sleep can have. In addition to feeling sleepy during the day, lack of sleep can cause memory and concentration problems, slower reflexes, and difficulty getting along with others. In some cases, lack of sleep can be deadly. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says that drowsy drivers cause thousands of car crashes each year.

If you need help getting to sleep at night, check out the following tips. And the next time you snuggle between the sheets, enjoy a sound, refreshing sleep.

Tips for Getting Sound Sleep

- Avoid caffeine for six hours and alcohol and nicotine for two to three hours before bedtime.

- Don't exercise too close to your bedtime. It is best if you finish exercising at least four hours before bedtime. Exercise raises your body's temperature, which can prevent or delay sleep. In the evening your body temperature naturally drops, which triggers a sleepy feeling.

- Clear your mind of the day's stress. Take a few minutes to talk about the day. Or, try making lists to help clear your mind of the day's stress. That way, when you get into bed, you will be able to focus on dozing, not doing. Deep breathing or relaxation exercises may help lull your body to sleep. If you can't sleep, get up and do something that's not very stimulating until you feel sleepy.

- Control your exposure to light. Darkness is a cue for your body to sleep. Use night-lights if you need to go to the bathroom or if you often wake up during the night. Bright lights can interrupt the body's natural sleep pattern.

- Turn alarm clocks toward the wall. Waking up in the middle of the night and checking the time may increase anxiety and prevent you from getting back to sleep.

- Wake up at the same time every day. Your body will respond well to a consistent cycle.

- Talk with your doctor before you resort to using any kind of sleeping pills whether prescription or over-the-counter.