

LACK OF SLEEP CAN CAUSE CONFUSION AND DISTORTION OF MEMORY

The elderly need more sleep

BY VISION REPORTERS

Sleep is important for a person's health and well-being. A good sleep helps the body to relax, refresh and restore energy. However, many elderly people soon discover that they are having difficulty in getting sleep. And when they do, it is for a few hours.

Age-related diseases can be difficult to deal with. However, when coupled with sleep disorders, the effects can be devastating. Mentally, lack of sleep can cause confusion, distortion of memory, depression and decreased mental capacity. Long-term insomnia affects an individual's ability to react appropriately to stress, which increases the risk of developing mental illness. Studies report that insomniacs are three times more likely to have a mental disorder. In the ageing population, this can impact the severity of dementia and paranoia.

The US National Sleep Foundation says 80% of people aged between 65 and 84, who have been diagnosed with four or more medical conditions, will have more sleep problems. While a chronic medical condition itself can contribute to sleep deprivation, sleep deprivation too, can exacerbate the symptoms of a chronic medical condition. A good night's sleep can go a long way in increasing strength, lifting mood and increasing the body's ability to fight infection.

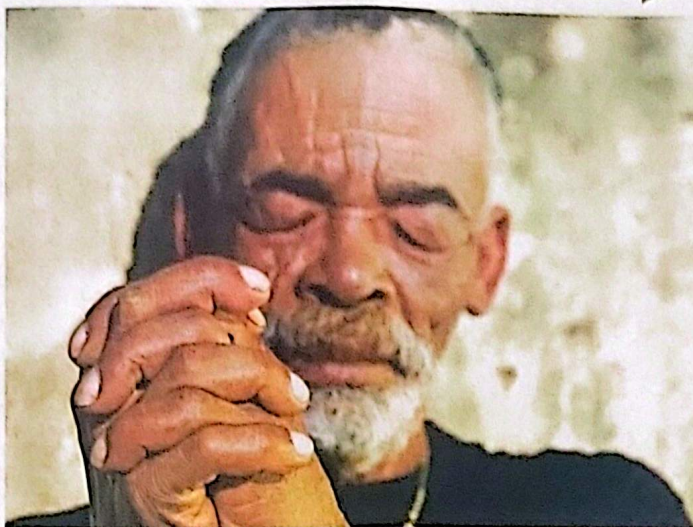
Doctors say lack of sleep causes diminished muscle strength. It leads to increased wear and tear on the vital organs, which causes heightened sensitivity to pain, disruption of insulin production and sugar metabolism. Lack of sleep increases the risk of diabetes and weakens the immune system, which decreases defence against illness.

Madrine Nalukwate, 83, says sleep started eluding her when she clocked 60. She says she now sleeps for few hours, sometimes waking up by 4:00am. She attributes this to her past life of having got used to waking up early.

However, Dr Herbert Mugarura, a family doctor, says people tend to sleep more lightly as they age than when they were younger, and often wake up during the night from aches and pains or the need to go to the bathroom. Sometimes boredom, depression, chronic pain and/or nutritional deficiencies cause them to sleep excessively during the day and this interrupts night sleep.

"Sleep patterns change over time. Children and adolescents need more sleep than adults."

The elderly need about the same amount of sleep as younger adults. They



As people grow old, their time for sleeping tends to reduce hence the need to exercise good sleep habits

HOW TO MANAGE LACK OF SLEEP

- Seeking medical assistance if lack of sleep is severe. The doctor will tell if the patient needs medical or psychological treatment. Solutions depend on the diagnosed problem and can either be medical, psychological or social.
- Use sleeping pills, but solving the original cause is more important. The elderly should not use sleeping pills without prescription from a doctor. And the sleeping pills should not be used for more than two weeks lest the patient becomes dependent on them hence worsening sleeping problems.

need seven to nine hours of sleep per night. Unfortunately, many elderly people find problems in achieving this. Along with the physical changes that occur as we get older, changes in our sleep patterns are a part of the normal ageing process. As people age, they tend to have a harder time falling asleep and more trouble staying asleep than when they were younger. It is a common misconception that sleep needs decline with age.

Desiderio Juuko, a psychiatric clinical officer at Butabika Hospital, attributed lack of good sleep to heart diseases, stroke, high blood pressure and kidney diseases.

"When an elderly person stops performing as they used to, does during the day, complain of headaches and body pain, it is an indication that they are not having a healthy sleep," he says.

Juuko says the elderly need a good sleep to keep their cognitive functions normal during the day.

"Elderly people who do not have a good sleep often develop headaches, fatigue and feel like they have low grade malaria," he says.

TYPES OF SLEEP PROBLEMS

The US National Sleep Foundation gives the types of sleep problems as lack of sleep and snoring.

Insomnia is lack of sleep related to an underlying cause such as a medical or psychiatric condition. It can be identified from such symptoms as excessive daytime sleepiness and difficulty in concentration.

The other type is snoring or sleep apnea. Loud snoring can be a symptom of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and may be associated with high blood pressure and other health problems. With

CAUSES OF LACK OF SLEEP

Desiderio Juuko, a psychiatric clinical officer at Butabika Hospital, says lack of sleep among the elderly is not supposed to be normal. The causes may be social such as irregular sleep hours, consumption of alcohol before bedtime, noisy environment and falling asleep with the TV on. Causes can also be

physiological such as pain or medical conditions. These include frequent need to urinate, pain, arthritis, asthma, diabetes, osteoporosis, nighttime heartburn as well as Alzheimer's disease, which can interfere with sleep.

Age-related causes include menopause, where hot flashes and night sweats interrupt many women's sleep. This can be managed by improving habits, especially diet and exercise. Medication can also cause sleep problems.

The elderly tend to take more medications than younger people and the combination of drugs, as well as their side-effects, can cause sleep deprivations. The doctor should be able to make changes to the medications to improve sleep.

Lack of exercise can be a problem too. If you are too sedentary, you may never feel sleepy or feel sleepy all the time. Regular aerobic exercise during the day can promote good sleep. Restless



TIPS FOR A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

1 BEDTIME SCHEDULE

Create a sleep-conducive environment: dark, quiet, comfortable, no mosquitoes/bedbugs. We tend to become more sensitive to noise as we age.

2 YOUR BED MATTERS

Sleep on a comfortable, supportive mattress and pillows.

3 EAT EARLY ENOUGH

Finish eating at least two -three hours before bed. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, sugary foods and big meals close to bedtime. Avoid nicotine. Have a light snack such as low-sugar cereal, yogurt, or warm milk.

4 CHECK YOUR LIGHTING

Use low-wattage bulbs and turn off the TV. Artificial lights at night can suppress the body's production of melatonin, the hormone that makes you sleepy.

5 DEVELOP BEDTIME RITUALS

You can develop soothing rituals such as taking a bath, playing music, or practising a relaxation technique such as meditation or deep breathing can help you wind down before bed.

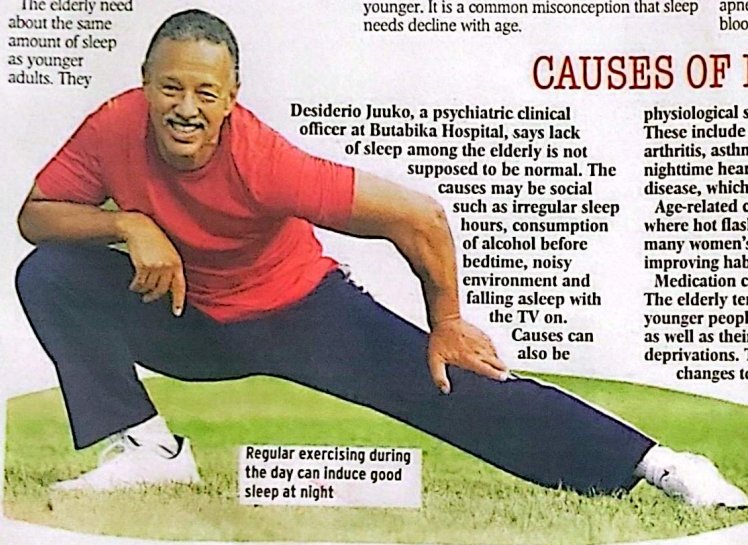
6 KEEP AWAKE DURING DAY

Do not nap too much during the day. Try not to worry about your sleep.

Helpguide.org

OSA, breathing even stops, sometimes for as long as 10-60 seconds and that affects the amount of oxygen in the blood. About 80% of dementia patients have sleep apnea. If untreated, sleep apnea puts a person at risk of conditions such as headaches, memory loss, depression and cardiovascular disease.

Compiled by Jacquiline Nakandi, Angel Nabweteme and Carol Ariba



Regular exercising during the day can induce good sleep at night