Melatonin may help you sleep

August 7 2017, by From Mayo Clinic News Network, Mayo Clinic News Network

Dear Mayo Clinic: Can melatonin supplements help insomnia? What are the side effects of melatonin supplements?

A: Melatonin supplements may help treat sleep problems in some adults. Melatonin is a natural hormone produced by your brain's pineal gland. It's normally synced with the rising and setting of the sun (circadian rhythm). Production increases as darkness approaches, peaks during the night and decreases as dawn arrives. Light exposure at night or when you normally would be sleeping - such as being in a different time zone or doing shift work - can throw off your circadian rhythm and melatonin production.

Melatonin supplements may help people whose melatonin levels are low. Multiple clinical trials suggest that melatonin can reduce the time it takes to fall asleep, increase total sleep time and improve quality of sleep. One study found that a relatively low dose of melatonin (0.3 milligrams) - one of the strengths available over the counter - was enough to improve nighttime sleep in older adults without drowsiness the next day.

Melatonin supplements generally have fewer side effects than do many prescription sleep drugs. For example, they don't produce dependence. Among older adults, the risks of prescription sleep medications often outweigh the benefits. Side effects of melatonin are few but may include daytime sleepiness and tiredness on waking. Headaches and dizziness also can occur when taking melatonin supplements. Less common side effects can include abdominal pain, mild anxiety, irritability, confusion

and feelings of depression. In general, however, melatonin supplements are considered fairly safe in the short term. More research is needed on the safety and effectiveness of long-term use.

If you're considering taking a melatonin supplement to help you sleep, talk with your health care provider first. Melatonin can interact with certain drugs, including those taken for blood clotting disorders, high blood pressure and diabetes. Your health care provider may recommend adjusting medication or supplement dosages for the best effects on your overall health.

If you do decide to take melatonin, choose commercial supplements produced in a lab. Melatonin supplements made from animal sources may contain contaminants. In addition, avoid activities that require alertness, such as driving, for four to five hours after taking melatonin.

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Citation: Melatonin may help you sleep (2017, August 7) retrieved 23 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-08-melatonin.html

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