

HEALTHY CHOICES

Latest tips on the art of living well.

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Melatonin: The answer for a good night's sleep?



If you have sleeping problems, you've probably heard of melatonin. It's the hormone your body makes every night to kick start sleep. It's also marketed as a supplement, to top up your natural melatonin – the idea being, this will give you a better night's sleep. But taking a hormone is not without risks. Before you consider a melatonin supplement, read on.

Melatonin is activated when it's dark. Remember, part of your sleep plan is to pull the curtains to make your bedroom really dark. For more information see Healthy Choices Issue No.2 "Are You Getting Enough?" That's because the darkness signals your body to release melatonin, sometimes called the 'hormone of darkness'.

Melatonin is released from your pineal gland, a pea sized gland located just above the middle of the brain. When melatonin is released, you start to feel calm and drowsy and your body temperature drops. You feel like sleeping.

Melatonin release should happen naturally and easily but can be compromised by too much light (including city lights or even the bright light from your TV) and other factors such as a haphazard sleep schedule (think jetlag) or ageing (melatonin production declines with age). When melatonin release is compromised, it is harder to fall asleep. That's why melatonin is widely marketed for sleeping problems.

The theory is, by taking extra melatonin – on top of what your body is already making – you will fall asleep faster and more easily. Some studies have shown this to be true but results from others are inconclusive. There is also concern the risks outweigh the benefits.

Potential side effects of taking melatonin include vivid dreams, nightmares or even sleep walking, hallucinations, day time drowsiness, headaches, mood problems, depression, heart problems and hormonal imbalance. Some people have reported dreams, hallucinations and feeling 'spaced out' on even a small dose of melatonin.

Melatonin must be used cautiously by people with existing health conditions such as heart disease or depression. If you

have an existing health condition, it is best to consult a medical professional before taking melatonin as the hormone may affect your health or interact with medications. Currently, there is a lack of evidence to ensure melatonin's safety and effectiveness long term.

Some countries, including New Zealand, only allow melatonin use by prescription and only for a short time - usually about two months. In countries where melatonin is available without prescription, there is concern over its quality. Melatonin manufacturing processes are not always regulated which can mean a product doesn't deliver what it claims. America's National Sleep Foundation says larger and longer term studies are needed before melatonin's risks and benefits can be fully understood.

If you choose to take melatonin, you are essentially taking something your body can make for itself. A healthier option might be to help your body release optimum levels of melatonin, by keeping your bedroom dark, removing bright electronic gadgets, avoiding nightlights or even wearing a sleep mask to block out all light.

There is some suggestion that a warm milky drink at night can increase your body's natural melatonin production by providing an amino acid called tryptophan. Tryptophan is naturally found in milk and it is used by the body to produce melatonin.

Creating a nightly sleep routine - putting work away for the day, enjoying a relaxing activity and a warm milky drink can do wonders for sleep. Try tackling your sleeping problem without melatonin supplements first. With persistence, you may be able to gently nudge your body into doing a good job of melatonin production itself, without the unwanted side effects.