

# Cancer Answers

Volume 4 Number 10  
March 2011  
Bridges to Beauty, Ltd  
www.bridges2beauty.net  
caring1@bridges2beauty.net

## Sleep: the most fun medicine of all!

This month's newsletter is the second in the series on "New Beginning's" and that means we are going to focus on how to get to get enough sleep...and good sleep. I am reminded of the words in a song from Mary Poppins, "Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down - in the most delightful way!" Sleep is BOTH the spoonful of sugar and the medicine because deep, restorative sleep is wonderful AND healing.

Of course, the converse can be said also. Not getting deep, restorative sleep is like a spoonful of straight castor oil: it is frustrating and extremely detrimental to both our mental and physical health. Relatively healthy people need deep, restorative sleep, but each of you journey hard every day through cancer, so it is very important to get a good night's rest to continue your arduous journey the next day, week and month.

Here are several things to implement, adjust, or improve on to aid your body in getting the best sleep possible.

**Exercise every day**, in the afternoon or early evening - preferably at least 4 hours prior to bedtime. The level of exercise will vary greatly for each of you. I do not have space to address this in detail, just remember that it is important to start where you are. By that I mean, if you have not been exercising at all, you may only be able to walk a minute or two from the house and back - building up by a half-minute each consecutive day. I address this at length in my book "A Woman's Cancer Journey Primer", which is available in hard copy or pdf form.

**Eat light, simple meals in the evening when you must eat late.** Hopefully you are making good food choices - but it is extremely important to eat right when dinner is later than usual and/or within two hours of your bedtime.

**Set a regular bedtime.** Go to bed at the same time every night - even on the weekends. Choose a time when you normally feel tired, so that you don't toss and turn. If you want to change your bedtime, make the change in small daily increments, such as 15 minutes earlier or later each day until you have reached your new preferred bedtime.

**Set a regular wake-up time.** If you're getting enough sleep, you should wake up naturally without an alarm. If you need an alarm clock to wake up on time, you may need to set an earlier bedtime. Once again, try to maintain your regular wake-time weekdays and weekends.

**Be smart about napping.** Taking a nap can be a great way to recharge, especially during treatment, but be smart about it. Try to nap in the early afternoon, whenever possible, and limit your nap to thirty minutes. This will recharge you without messing with your natural sleep-wake rhythm.

**Make your bedroom "sleep friendly".** When it's time to sleep, make sure that your environment is dark. Even dim lights can confuse the body clock. Heavy curtains or shades can help block light from windows, or you can try an eye mask to cover your eyes. A bedroom that is too hot or too cold can interfere with quality sleep. Most people sleep best around 65° F.

## Sleep, cont'd.

Finally, use your bedroom just for sleeping - not watching television, working on your laptop, etc.. You want your mind to associate your bedroom with sleep - not activity.

**Sleep Aids?** Many of you are dealing with pain which affects your sleep. Whenever possible use natural pain relievers, relaxers and sleep inducers instead of chemical ones.

**White willow bark** has been used medicinally to reduce pain for over 6,000 years. It works very much like aspirin because it has naturally occurring salicylic acid in its chemical makeup. White willow bark is 100% natural and aspirin is created in a lab by drug companies...so, why not consider white willow bark as your pain reliever of choice.

**Melatonin** is a hormone made by the pineal gland. It helps control your sleep and wake cycles. Light affects how much melatonin your body produces, so during the shorter days of the winter your body may produce melatonin either earlier or later in the day than usual. This can lead to seasonal affective disorder (SAD) and insomnia. Melatonin supplements taken in doses from 0.2 to 20.0 mg, prior to bedtime can be very helpful.

**GABA** is a brain chemical (gamma-aminobutyric acid) that regulates and stops brain activity during sleep. If you lack this chemical it interferes with the "deep" delta stage of sleep. Your doctor can help you determine if and how much GABA is right for you.

Pay a bit more for good-quality supplements. "Budget-priced" often equates to low-quality with regards to supplements. Be sure to ask your doctor prior to using any of these. - Sweet Dreams!