Sleep: The Key to a Healthy Liver

April 17, 2017 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

A few weeks ago, an event occurred that is ruining my health—daylight savings time (DST). It happens every year, and without exception, it takes me weeks to recover. I love the extra hour of light, but my body has a hard time getting used to it. Apparently, I am not the only one. After we turn the clocks ahead, there is an increase in strokes, heart attacks, and accidents. If I was queen of the world, I would abolish DST. Fortunately for everyone, I am not in control of the world. Also, fortunately for the world, my body gets used to the clock change. However, it is a good opportunity to explore the relationship between sleep and health, especially as it applies to people with liver disease.

The Benefits of Sleep

Getting good quality and quantity of sleep is turbo charges your body and mind. A good night's rest is like hitting the reset button. If you skimp on quantity or quality, you may suffer short- and long-term consequences. Some of the positive effects that sleep provides are:

- Better physical health. Sleep boosts your immune system, and you will likely get sick less often. Plus, you will likely have more energy throughout the day.
- Reduces the risk for serious medical conditions such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.
- Helps maintain healthy body weight. Sleep is a vital player in your body's ability to regulate hormones that control your appetite and metabolism. Many of us crave carbohydrates when we are tired.
- Lowers stress and improves your mood
- Helps you focus and think more creatively. Sleep may ease your ability to solve problems and remember important information.
- Improves relationships. You may find that you are more patient when you have slept well.
- Reduces injuries. When it comes to driving, sleep deprivation is like being intoxicated; sleepy drivers cause thousands of car accidents every year. Well-rested people are more alert, make

better decisions, and use better judgment.

Sleep and Liver Disease

According to recent research, most patients with advanced cirrhosis have disturbed sleep, which can reduce quality of life. (Marwan Ghabril, et al., Most Individuals With Advanced Cirrhosis Have Sleep Disturbances, Which Are Associated With Poor Quality of Life, Clinical Gastroenterology and Hepatology, January 2017). Other studies found that patients with cirrhosis have a harder time falling asleep and staying asleep. Their sleep is of poor quality, and in addition to sleeping less, they feel sleepy during the day.

The reasons that liver patients struggle with insomnia are not fully understood, but we do have some insight into this. The liver has its own clock, and injury to the liver may mess with the clock. Also, the liver helps to regulate hormones, all vital to the body's sleep-wake cycle. Further, patients with advanced liver disease may suffer from obstructive sleep apnea, which may interfere with sleep quality and quantity.

Tips for Improving Your Sleep

Each of us needs a certain amount of sleep every night, usually between 7 and 9 hours for adults. This is all very well and good, but knowing how much sleep I need does not mean much if I am unable to sleep. As F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "The worst thing in the world is to try to sleep and not to." So how do we improve our chances of getting a good night's sleep? Here are some tips:

- Get expert help. A sleep specialist can evaluate your sleep problems and make necessary recommendations. For instance, if you have sleep apnea, you may need a CPAP machine, mouth guard, or other intervention.
- Turn off all electronic devices several hours before bedtime. Watching TV or working on the computer stimulates the brain to stay awake, making it much harder to fall asleep. Don't use a mobile device or watch TV in your bedroom.
- Try to go to bed at the same time every night; wake up at the same time in the morning.
- Be sure your sleep environment is comfortable. A cool room, warm blankets, and a comfortable bed and pillow are essential. The room should be dark and quiet.
- Exercise on a regular basis, preferably daily.
- If you nap, keep it short and early in the day.
- Try reading before bedtime, but use a low-watt bulb.
- Do not eat a few hours before bedtime but don't go to bed hungry. If you eat something, choose

food that is light and nutritious. Avoid spicy or greasy food.

- Take a hot bath before retiring.
- If you need sleep aids, talk to your doctor about melatonin or medication that may help you get started on a healthier sleep pattern.

Health relies on a foundation of good sleep. When I sleep well, I eat better, think better, and move better. I feel like I am queen of the world. We don't need science to tell us why sleep is imortant. Shakespeare knew that, as sleep figures prominently in many of his plays. This quote from Shakespeare's Macbeth says in a few words what it took me an entire article to write:

> Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
>
> The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
>
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
>
> Chief nourisher in life's feast.

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Resources

American Academy of Sleep Medicine www.sleepeducation.com

American Sleep Association www.sleepassociation.org

The National Sleep Foundation www.sleepfoundation.org

The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life, One Night at a Time by Arianna Huffington

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