

# Health and Wellness

Provided by Bethany Care Ministry Outreach Program

## Can't Sleep? Pills Aren't The Answer

**M**ost people, even those who never had insomnia in their younger years, find their sleep cycle changes considerably as they age. As a result, big money is made selling pills to treat the problem, including prescription medications, over the counter (OTC) products and alternative medicines (herbs, hormones, etc.). BUT are these products safe or even effective? There is much evidence to indicate they are not.



including Tylenol PM, Benadryl or any other product containing this active ingredient should NOT be used by an older person.

Those trying to maintain their health and independence or help a loved one stay safe should take note of what medications are taken, both prescription and OTC. Read labels, ask why the medications are being used. Some cold and cough remedies have diphenhydramine as an ingredient.

Though opinions vary on how to treat insomnia, one thing mostly agreed upon in the medical community; **There is no pill that is an effective long term treatment for insomnia.** And some remedies touted as harmless, in reality have adverse effects, especially on older adults. At the top of the list (because it is so overused) is OTC **diphenhydramine**, better known as **Benadryl**. Best known to combat allergy symptoms, it is an active ingredient in **Tylenol PM** which so many people pop without a second thought.

Along with fall prevention measures such as removing throw rugs and adding night lights, pitching the Tylenol PM or other sleeping pills may be good advice. **Prescription sleeping pills may be habit forming and a person trying to give them up should always consult their MD as they should be weaned slowly.**

A study by three Yale researchers, printed in the Archives of Internal Medicine in 2001 concluded that older patients who were given Benadryl while hospitalized had a much higher risk of cognitive decline, behavioral disturbances and catheter placement than did a similar group that did not receive this drug. Hospitalizations were longer in this group too. Side effects of diphenhydramine include: sedation, weakness, blood pressure changes, leading to falls and fractures, also dry mouth and urination problems.

So what to do about insomnia if pills are not the answer? Not simple, but some ideas from Mayo Clinic are: 1) Stick to a schedule, sleeping primarily at night. If you nap, maximum of ½ hour in the afternoon. 2) Decrease your evening food and fluid intake. 3) Avoid alcohol and nicotine in the evening and caffeine 8 hours before bed. 4) Get regular exercise, but not right before bed. 5) Make your bedroom cool, dark and bed comfortable. Some find a fan helps block out noise. 6) Develop a quiet routine, dim the lights. Go to bed when you are tired, but if you cannot sleep in 15-20 minutes, get up again until you are tired.

But is Benadryl/diphenhydramine safe for those healthy and in their own homes who need a sleep aid? Evidence pretty much says diphenhydramine,

Sleeping pills of any kind are a last resort. Check with your doctor before taking sleep aids. All medications even over the counter ones have side effects and interactions that can impact health and safety.

Megan Karth, RN, Bethany Community Care Ministry

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