

Mother Nurture

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Dealing with Insomnia

Rachel, our 11-month-old, is now sleeping (mostly) through the night (yes!). But I'm not. I fall asleep OK, but wake around 3 or 4 am (when Rachel used to), toss and turn for a few hours, and then maybe get another hour of sleep before the alarm clock goes off.

It's common for a mom to be lying awake in bed while her baby or toddler is snoozing blissfully. Unfortunately, low quantity and poor quality (= depth) of sleep erode a mother's health and well-being, and give her a strong shove down the slippery slope toward depression. Getting plenty of good sleep is a crucial aspect of replenishing oneself and preventing depletion. Happily, there are plenty of good methods:

- Try to reduce caffeine overall, eat dinner early, avoid late night chocolate (it contains a caffeine-like substance), and restrict alcohol (which relaxes you at first but then can keep you awake).
- Do everything possible to lower stress. Cortisol hormone normally rises in the morning to prepare you for the activities of the day, but with too much stress, this hormone will kick into gear extra early, waking you at 3 or 4 am. (You can also test cortisol pretty inexpensively to see if this is happening to you.)
- In the hour before bedtime, do relaxing activities like listening to music, meditating, doing yoga, taking a bath, singing to your baby, etc. Avoid arguments with your children or mate.
- If your mind is worrying or obsessing, try writing down your concerns and promising yourself you'll do what's possible to deal with them in the morning. Or extend compassion toward yourself or toward the people you are worrying about.
- Relax your body by imagining your hands are very warm, progressively relaxing each part of your body, or imagining you are in a very peaceful setting.
- Make sure you are getting enough magnesium and calcium, both of which are needed for sleep. The Daily Value (DV) of them is 320 milligrams (mg) and 1000 mg, respectively. You could try a slightly higher dose, 500 and 1200 mg respectively. (For details about nutrition for mothers, see our book, *Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships*, published by Penguin in March, 2002.)
- Finally, you could explore the herbs, valerian and passionflower, available in tinctures at the health food store. Low doses of the hormone, melatonin, can help a person return to sleep. And the amino acid precursor to the neurotransmitter, serotonin – 5-hydroxytryptphan (5-HTP) – can also aid sleep. But you should NOT try these if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, and they are generally best considered only if you are working with a licensed health practitioner experienced in their use.

*(Rick Hanson is a clinical psychologist, Jan Hanson is an acupuncturist/nutritionist, and they are raising a daughter and son, ages 11 and 14. With Ricki Pollycove, M.D., they are the authors of *Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships*, published by Penguin. You can see their website at www.nurturemom.com or email them with questions or comments at info@nurturemom.com; unfortunately, a personal reply may not always be possible.)*