Circadian Sleep Disorders Fact Sheet

Definitions

- Circadian Sleep Disorders (CSDs) are neurological disorders in which the sleep-wake cycle is out of sync with the day-night cycle. They include:
  - Delayed Sleep Phase Syndrome (DSPS), characterized by an inability to fall asleep until very late at night, with the resulting need to sleep late in the morning or into the afternoon (a delayed body clock).
  - Non-24-Hour Sleep-Wake Disorder (Non-24), a condition in which a person’s day length is significantly longer than 24 hours, so that sleep times get later each day, cycling around the clock in a matter of days or weeks.

Symptoms

- Difficulty falling asleep at the desired time
- Chronic tiredness, especially when trying to follow a daytime schedule
- Sleep deprivation symptoms which can mimic depression, ADHD, fibromyalgia, and other disorders

Causes

- Circadian Sleep Disorders are neurological disorders, not mental illnesses.
- Hormones in the body are not secreted on a normal day-night schedule.
- These disorders are not simply due to a lack of self-discipline. Patients are really unable to fall asleep and awaken on a normal schedule.

Diagnosis

- A sleep specialist will look at a sleep log, possibly supported by actigraph monitoring.
- He may prescribe an overnight sleep study to rule out other causes.
- Many doctors are not aware of these disorders, or not trained to recognize them.

Treatment

- Circadian Sleep Disorders are chronic, lifelong conditions. There is no cure.
- They are often treated by using bright light in the morning, avoiding bright light in the evening, and taking melatonin supplements. The timing of both light and melatonin is critical – consult a sleep specialist.
- Sleeping pills are rarely effective when used in conflict with the body’s natural cycle as they do not correct the underlying circadian abnormality.
- Treatment does not work for everyone.

Living with DSPS or Non-24

- Both conditions often severely disrupt essential activities such as work, school and parenting.
- Attempting to live on a normal daytime schedule in the absence of successful treatment results in severe sleep deprivation which often seriously impacts health.

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