



# When Counting She

By Cdr. Ken Brinsko,  
Naval Hospital, Naples, Italy

**D**ifficulty falling or staying asleep is a common problem. According to National Sleep Foundation surveys, about half of all Americans report sleep problems at least occasionally. These woes, called insomnia by doctors, have far-reaching, negative effects on such things as concentration, productivity, mood, and safety.

Improving your sleep may require you to examine your diet, exercise patterns, sleeping environment, personal habits, lifestyle, and current concerns. As you start seeing the connection between, for example, what and when you eat and the nights you sleep poorly, you can develop your own sleep plan.

## Just Say “No” to Caffeine and Alcohol



All too often, we eat and drink without thinking about the effects. That afternoon cup of coffee seems like a good idea at the time. The dinnertime cocktails may appear a fitting celebration of the day’s success, but those

drinks can prove to be an enemy of restful sleep.

Coffee contains caffeine, as do many teas and sodas. Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it has an alerting or wake-up effect. For some, a small amount of caffeine early in the day can cause problems falling asleep 10 or 12 hours later. I know many people need that caffeine in the morning or after lunch for a jump-start. In fact, some of you may be addicted to caffeine. Ever sleep in on a Saturday morning and wake up with a headache that goes away after drinking coffee? If you answer yes, you’re addicted. Try eliminating caffeinated beverages after lunch or completely for a few weeks. If you’re sleeping better, you may have found the culprit.

Alcohol, in contrast, often is thought of as a sedative—a calming drug. Although alcohol may speed the initiation of sleep, it actually increases the number of times you awaken in the latter half of the night. Moreover, the deep stages of sleep, which are required to feel rested, are interrupted all night long.

## Are You What You Eat?

Everything you eat can affect nighttime slumber. For example, tomato products and spicy foods give many people heartburn (as does eating too fast). Lying down makes heartburn worse, and





# ep Doesn't Work

heartburn makes falling asleep more difficult. Heartburn also can awaken you in the middle of the night. On the other hand, eating protein before sleeping can make you fall asleep faster. There also is some truth to the belief that drinking a glass of milk before bedtime helps you fall asleep. Avoid heavy meals closer to bedtime, though.

Drinking too much of any beverage can lead to more awakenings because of the need to urinate during the night. Also, the older we get, the more we experience these nighttime awakenings. Men especially are affected because of the increasing enlargement of their prostate glands.

## Saying Goodbye to Tobacco

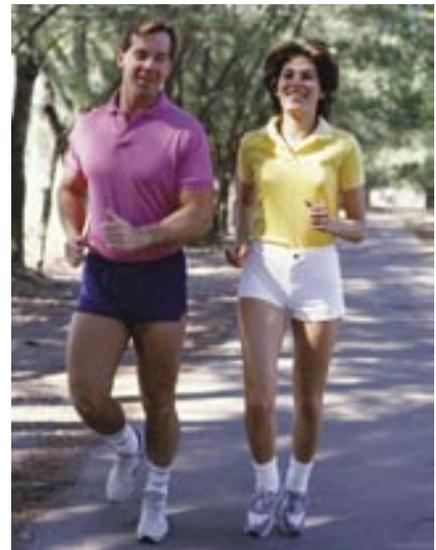
Smokers and non-smokers alike may not know that nicotine, like caffeine, is a stimulant. And when smokers go to sleep, they experience nicotine withdrawal. Research suggests that nicotine is linked to difficulty falling asleep, as well as waking up.



## Exercise Has Many Benefits

The next place to look for the cause of sleep problems is your exercise routine. Exercise can be a boon for good sleep, especially

when done regularly in the afternoon and not close to bedtime. Late afternoon may be the perfect time for exercising—it will provide the added benefit of suppressing your dinnertime appetite. If you've been exercising close to bedtime and having trouble falling or staying asleep, try to arrange your workout earlier in the day.



## Snoring

Snoring occurs when loose tissues in the back of the throat vibrate during movement of air while inhaling or exhaling. These same tissues also can obstruct your airway momentarily. This condition, called sleep apnea, probably is responsible for more sleep disturbances than we realize. When your body realizes it's suffocating, it will adjust its position to relieve the obstruction but, in the process, disturbs your sleep. This problem can occur many times during the night without you realizing it, robbing you of restful sleep.

Finally, try soaking in hot water (a hot tub or bath) to get relaxed before bedtime. You also should establish a regular bedtime and wake-time schedule. ■

*The author was assigned to VP-16 when he wrote this article.*