The promise and danger of sleep aids and antidepressants

By Clifford Woods

One of the biggest sources of revenue for the big drug companies are their so-called mood-altering drug therapies. Also included are sleep aids that help patients with insomnia and psychological anxieties get some rest.

Sleep aids

Most sleeping pills are classified as "sedative hypnotics." Sedative hypnotics include benzodiazepines (*a drug class used for treating anxiety, panic attacks, depression, insomnia, seizures, nausea, vomiting, muscle relaxation ...)* as well as barbiturates.

There is the class called “Benzodiazepines”. And these include the popular drugs, Xanax and Ativan, which are advertised as so-called, anti-anxiety medications. They help increase drowsiness and induce sleep. These benzodiazepines are potentially addictive. In this class, there is also Temazepam, a known powerful sleep inducer. But some studies have shown that Temazepam can lead to an up to 50% risk of Alzheimer’s disease.

Another class of sedatives is Barbiturates, which are supposed to help depress the body’s central nervous system – an effect that could eventually lead to sedation. They can be short or long-acting, and are prescribed as sedatives or sleeping pills. More commonly, these hypnotic drugs are usually limited for use as anesthesia.

Barbiturates are also highly addictive and are known to cause constipation, diarrhea, changes in appetite, dizziness, dry mouth/throat, and gas. A potentially dangerous symptom is the daytime drowsiness, which leads to serious safety concerns, especially if someone is driving a motor vehicle.

There are relatively “newer " sleep aids that may help reduce the time to make someone fall asleep. The more popular sleep-inducing drugs include Lunesta, Sonata, and the big-selling Ambien. There is also Rozerem, and Belsomra which acts differently from the other sleep aids.

Although these are somewhat less likely than benzodiazepines to be habit-forming, or addictive, the can still cause many side-effects, such as, daytime drowsiness, feeling tired, dizziness, weakness, feeling "drugged" or light-headed, loss of coordination, nose or throat irritation, stuffy nose, dry mouth, and stomach problems. These sleep aids work quickly to increase drowsiness and sleep.

Most of these sleeping pills also have potentially harmful side effects, including parasomnias (*a category of sleep disorders that involve abnormal movements, behaviors, emotions, perceptions, and dreams that occur while falling asleep, sleeping …).*

In this condition, the person is asleep and is unaware of what is happening. Parasomnias from sleeping pills are complex sleep behaviors and may also include, sleep eating, making phone calls, and even having sex while asleep. As if these are not dangerous enough, there is also sleep driving. While these are rare, the problem with parasomnias is that these are difficult to detect once the medication kicks in.

Of course, mixing alcohol and sleeping pills can be extremely dangerous. This combination increases the sedative effect of the pills, and is sometimes fatal. In fact, all sleeping pill labels warn sternly against taking alcohol while taking the drug.

In addition to all these symptoms, a serious, and sometimes deadly side effect of some of these medicines someone could be allergic to, is anaphylaxis, which is an acute allergic reaction. Then there is angioedema, which is severe facial swelling.

There are many **natural remedies**, herbal "medicines", and **supplements** that can help replace prescription sleep medicines. For example, magnesium and calcium are both known sleep boosters, and when taken together they become even more effective. An added benefit of taking magnesium is that it may cancel out potential heart problems that might arise from taking calcium alone. Many reputable outlets make formulations with magnesium and calcium available for safe consumption.

<u>Antidepressants</u>

People, who get treated for moderate to severe depression, are probably given prescriptions for antidepressant medications. These are meant to relieve symptoms and, usually form part of an overall treatment program that include psychoanalysis, and counselling.

The major types of antidepressants are tricyclic antidepressants, or TCAs, that are some of the first antidepressants that were used to treat depression. They affect the levels of the two chemical messengers or neurotransmitters, norepinephrine (*Norepinephrine is similar to adrenaline. It works by constricting (narrowing) the blood vessels and increasing blood pressure and blood glucose (sugar) levels*) and serotonin (*is a chemical found in the human body. It carries signals along and between nerves - a neurotransmitter*), in the brain.

While these drugs have been shown to be effective in treating depression, they have more side effects, and so are usually not the first drugs prescribed.

Another early form of antidepressants are Monoamine oxidase inhibitors, or MAOIs. These are prescribed for people with depression who do not otherwise positively respond to other treatments. But apart from the usual side effects, these drugs can interact negatively with substances in certain foods, such as cheese, beer, and wine. Serious symptoms can also arise if these are taken with cough syrups and other medications.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs, are the newer forms of antidepressant. These drugs work primarily by altering the amount of serotonin produced. Then there are the serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors, or SNRI's which treat depression by increasing the availability of serotonin and norepinephrine. The most prescribed drugs for battling depression are Zoloft and Prozac, which is said to affect these brain chemicals.

Antidepressants have a whole host of side-effects that manifest themselves not only physically, but also in emotional and mental aspects. The physical effects include nausea, insomnia, fatigue, drowsiness, increased appetite, dry mouth, constipation, blurred vision, and dizziness.

From an emotional and mental aspect, a prominent side effect is the loss of sexual desire, together with other sexual problems such as erectile dysfunction, or ED, and decreases in orgasm. Also observed are agitation, irritability, and anxiety.

Natural remedy can help people avoid these sometimes deadly symptoms by providing "body balance" **supplements** that may provide relief to those who otherwise use prescription sleeping pills and anti-depressants. Some formulations include St. John's Wort, or hypericum perforatum, an herb that has been cultivated in Europe for centuries, where healers there have used it to dispel that which is now referred to as clinical depression.

Another natural remedy is S-adenosyl-methionine, or SAM-e. This is a common chemical present in all cells in the body. Through simple biochemistry, it is converted into other important chemicals, including the mood-regulating brain chemicals that we mentioned which are addressed by prescription anti-depressants. Then there are the Omega-3 Fatty Acids, derived from fatty cold-water fish and fish oil **supplements**. These have been known to provide crucial support for the proper regulation of a number of brain functions, including mood.