

If you have trouble sleeping, don't reach for supplements or medication. Consult a doctor instead, says Amanda Schupak

Wakeup call



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One in eight American adults is regularly taking some kind of sleep aid, such as a supplement or an over-the-counter drug, to help them fall or stay asleep, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Dr Sujay Kansagra, a sleep specialist at Duke University Medical Center, US, said the findings suggested that many people were trying to hack their way to better sleep, expecting a supplement such as melatonin or magnesium to be "a magic pill".

What they should be doing instead, he added, is working with a doctor to address the root cause of their sleep troubles.

Sleep problems are common. Another report released last month by the CDC found that nearly one-third of adults were not getting the minimum seven hours of sleep a night that doctors recommend. Both reports analysed survey responses col-

lected from tens of thousands of American adults in 2024.

The new data showed that women were significantly more likely than men to have trouble falling asleep and also more likely to take something to help.

The most commonly reported were over-the-counter medications or supplements (about 6 per cent), followed by prescription drugs (more than 5 per cent) and CBD or cannabis (about 4 per cent).

The report found that the use of prescription or over-the-counter sleep aids increased with age. But the reverse was true for marijuana or CBD products — about 6 per cent of adults ages 18 to 34 used them for sleep compared with just 2 per cent of those older than 65.

The popularity of supplements reflects what Dr Kansagra and his colleagues have seen in the clinic. He said his patients primarily took melatonin and were increasingly interested in magnesium, which is

often hyped on social media and promoted by well-known health influencers.

There is limited evidence that magnesium, which is often sold as magnesium glycinate or magnesium threonate, helps with sleep. It can be helpful for people who have trouble sleeping because of muscle tension, cramps or restless leg syndrome, said Dr Ana Krieger, medical director of the Center for Sleep Medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine and NewYork-Presbyterian, US. Dr Krieger recommends avoiding magnesium oxide, which can cause intestinal discomfort. Another form, magnesium citrate, can have a laxative effect.

She said she was sceptical about the value of taking supplements that contain melatonin, a sleepiness-inducing hormone that the body naturally releases at night. Some research suggests that taking melatonin can help people fall asleep several minutes faster,

but it doesn't work for everyone and has performed no better than a placebo in other studies.

Dr Kansagra said more of his patients used supplements than over-the-counter sleep aids that are often made with antihistamines similar to those found in Benadryl. While these can help some people fall asleep, he said, it often leaves them feeling groggy the next day. These drugs can also come with risks.

He added that there was no good data on whether CBD helped with sleep.

Dr Kansagra and other experts worried that by relying on supplements, people might fail to recognise a medical issue that is preventing them from getting enough quality sleep. For example, conditions such as sleep apnoea or anxiety can affect your ability to get a good night's rest, he noted, as can certain medications, including some antidepressants and decongestants.

Your life circumstances or changes to your routine can also

affect sleep, Dr Krieger noted.

"If we're really stressed out, or overworked, or we stay on the computer too late at night, we can't expect to have a great sleep," Dr Krieger said. "If we alternate our sleep schedules from waking up at 7am during the week to going to bed at 2am on the weekends and sleeping in, supplements won't fix that."

Of course, stress and other factors that can interfere with your rest aren't always in your control. But experts said that sticking to the basics of sleep hygiene as best you can will have a bigger, and longer-lasting, benefit than a supplement or medication. These include keeping a consistent sleep-wake schedule even on the weekends, getting sunlight first thing in the morning, exercising regularly, limiting your use of devices in the hour or so before bedtime and keeping your bedroom cool and dark.

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