

New Alzheimer's Warning Sign which Has to Do With Your Sleep

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Alzheimer's disease is a devastating condition that impacts millions of families around the world. But scientists are still trying to pinpoint the elements that go into why some people develop Alzheimer's disease and others don't. Now, a new study suggests that your sleep patterns may play a role.

The study, which was published in the journal *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, specifically looked at the relationship between REM sleep and Alzheimer's disease. But what's the link between the two and, more importantly, how can you use this information to lower

your risk of developing Alzheimer's disease? A neurologist explains.

Meet the expert: W. Christopher Winter, MD, a neurologist and sleep medicine physician with Charlottesville Neurology and Sleep Medicine and host of the Sleep Unplugged podcast.

What did the study find?

For the study, researchers looked at how long it took 123 people to reach **rapid eye movement (REM)** sleep for the first time after falling asleep, as well as several biomarkers linked to Alzheimer's disease. (REM sleep is a stage of sleep where your eyes move quickly and you dream, per the Cleveland Clinic. It's important for learning and memory, too.)

Of the participants, 64 had Alzheimer's disease and 41 had mild cognitive impairment, while the others had normal cognitive function. All of the participants did a sleep study, as well as scans for biomarkers that indicated Alzheimer's. **The researchers discovered that people who took longer to get to the REM stage of sleep were more likely to have biomarkers of Alzheimer's disease.**

Is there a relationship between sleep and Alzheimer's?

The relationship between sleep and Alzheimer's disease is still being explored. The Alzheimer's Society notes that **people living with dementia tend to have sleep issues**, but the evidence is currently unclear on whether poor sleep is a risk factor for the disease. However, some research suggests that **poor sleep could raise your risk of Alzheimer's**. A study published in November found that 35 percent of people who were considered poor sleepers (and ***felt excessively tired during the day*** as a result) went on to develop ***motoric cognitive risk syndrome (MCR)***, which is considered **a precursor to dementia**.

"Poor sleep quality has been linked to Alzheimer's disease," says W. **Christopher Winter, MD**, a neurologist and sleep medicine physician with Charlottesville Neurology and Sleep Medicine and host of the Sleep Unplugged podcast. "Conversely, individuals who sleep well, and get consistent amounts of sleep on a consistent schedule, seem to reduce their risk of cognitive impairment."

Can a lack of REM sleep increase my risk of Alzheimer's?

It's hard to say for sure at this point. While the researchers concluded that more studies are needed, they also said a slower movement to REM sleep could serve as a "potential marker" for Alzheimer's disease. Given that good sleep is linked to good overall health, it can't hurt to try to improve your sleep.

How can I get more REM sleep?

Most people go through four to six sleep cycles a night, and REM sleep is part of that. Unfortunately, you can't

dictate the stages of sleep you enter and when. What you can do is try to focus on getting good sleep, period.

Dr. Winter offers up these tips to help support good sleep:

- Have a set bedtime and wake time, and do your best to stick to it.
- Limit alcohol and caffeine, especially avoiding caffeine later in the day.
- Try to be physically active, and aim to work out in the mornings to support your body's natural sleep/wake cycle.
- Create a good, consistent bedtime routine that helps you wind down for the evening.

Be wary of sleep aids. *"Ironically, some sleep aids affect REM sleep,"* Winter says.

How can I reduce my risk of Alzheimer's?

Researchers don't know exactly what causes Alzheimer's disease and dementia, making it tough to know for sure how to prevent it. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends doing these things to help lower your risk:

- Be physically active
- Try to prevent or manage diabetes
- Manage your blood pressure
- Try to prevent or correct hearing loss
- Try to limit or avoid drinking alcohol
- Try to limit or avoid smoking

If you're struggling with sleep, Winter says it's important to consult with a healthcare professional sooner rather than later. They should be able to do a sleep study—which can give you more information on what's behind your sleep issues—and make personalized recommendations from there.