



ConsumerReports[®]

Choosing Wisely[®]

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation

AGS Geriatrics
Healthcare
Professionals
Leading Change. Improving Care for Older Adults.

Sleeping pills can have risks for older adults

Try safer and better treatments first

Nearly 1 in 3 older people in the U.S. take sleeping pills. But these pills have risks for older adults. Plus, they may not work so well.

The good news is that there are safer and better treatments for sleep problems. Before you pop a pill, give these a chance. (See “Advice from Consumer Reports.”)

Bad side effects

Sleeping pills can have harmful side effects in older adults. This is true even for non-prescription drugs and new “Z” drugs. Sleeping pills may affect you more than younger adults. Plus, they may stay in your body longer.

Sleeping pills may cause confusion and memory problems. These problems can make you more likely to have a car crash. And they may make you twice as likely to fall or break your hip.

Other side effects

Some over-the-counter drugs can have other serious side effects, too. These include Benadryl Allergy, Advil PM, Tylenol PM, and Unisom. They may make it hard to go to the bathroom. They may cause dry mouth. Plus, they may make you feel drowsy the next day.

Sleeping pills may not help much

Many ads for sleeping pills promise a full, restful night of sleep. But studies show this is not always true. On average, people who take sleeping pills sleep only a little longer and better than those who don't.



Get a checkup

Before you resort to sleeping pills, get a full medical exam. Your sleep problems may be caused by a health problem. For instance, you may have depression, anxiety, pain, or restless leg syndrome.

Try our tips for better sleep

If you still have trouble sleeping, try our tips for better sleep (see “Advice from Consumer Reports”).

When to try sleeping pills

Ask your doctor or nurse about trying sleeping pills if sleep problems are affecting your life and if nothing else has helped. But make sure they check in with you frequently to make sure the drug helps—and doesn’t harm—you.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment.

© 2016 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American Geriatrics Society. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit

ConsumerHealthChoices.org/about-us.

Advice from Consumer Reports

Tips for better sleep

Stay on schedule

Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Do this even on weekends. This helps your body get into a routine.

Be active during the day

Being active can help you sleep better. But try to get your activity early in the day. That way, your body has a chance to wind down before bed.

Watch what you eat and drink

Food and drink can perk you up. So stop eating at least three hours before bedtime. Stop drinking caffeine at 3 pm, or even earlier. And limit alcohol.

Set the stage for sleep

In the hours before bed, do something calming. Try listening to music, or reading a book. Avoid bright lights and screens—they can keep you awake.

When it’s time for bed, keep pets out of your bedroom. That way, they won’t disturb you.

If you can’t sleep, take a break

If you don’t fall asleep soon, get out of bed. Do something that quiets you. Go back to bed when you feel drowsy.

For more sleep tips, go to HealthinAging.org.