

## Eye-Opening Facts about Melatonin

Getting plenty of sleep is vital - not only for your ability to feel well rested and alert, but also for your health and wellbeing in general. The [National Institutes of Health](#) warns a chronic lack of sleep can increase the risk for a myriad of health issues, including stroke, seizures, high blood pressure and heart disease.

For many Americans, however, sleep doesn't always come easily. In fact, [nearly 60 million Americans a year](#) experience insomnia and wake up feeling unrefreshed. For some, getting back into a sleep routine is as easy as counting sheep. For others, it might take a bit of assistance.

Dr. Sarah Zallek is a neurologist who specializes in sleep disorders for OSF Sleep. She says sleep disruptions can have countless causes such as personal losses, stress or sadness. The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted sleep for many.

"A huge number of people had sleep disruption during COVID, and a lot of people turned to over the counter medications or other therapies for their sleep during that time," says Dr. Zallek. "It's not just COVID, though. I think people are more aware of sleep and its disruptions, and there's a lot of marketing out there for products and services to help sleep for better or worse."

One sleep aid option that is becoming more popular is the use of melatonin supplements. Melatonin is a hormone your brain produces in response to darkness. It helps with the timing of your [circadian rhythms](#) and with sleep.

Melatonin can be made synthetically, and is most often used as a supplement in this form. According to recent [study findings](#) published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), its use is becoming more popular; melatonin sales increased 150% between 2016 and 2020.

But does melatonin really work? Dr. Zallek says while melatonin does have some value, finding the reason behind a sleep disruption is the best long term solution.

"The vast majority of us who have sleeping problems aren't going to need melatonin or a prescription sleeping pill or anything else for their sleep because we want to treat the underlying problem. But if you have trouble sleeping, melatonin might be helpful."

In the U.S., melatonin is sold as a supplement and is not regulated as a drug. This means the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't have oversight over the purity of ingredients or the accuracy of dosage claims. Without that oversight, Dr. Zallek warns that there might be more – or less – than you bargained for in your bottle.

"Manufacturers of something like melatonin can put a lot of different things in the bottle without necessarily being noticed. In old studies I know that they've analyzed some melatonin products and found none, and found a lot more melatonin in other products. One product had valium in it, which will definitely make you go to sleep but is not the goal. So you don't know what's in the bottle and over the counter products are risky for that reason," she warns.

Adults aren't alone when it comes to sporadic sleep issues. Kids can suffer from insomnia and other sleep disorders as well, and more and more often, parents are turning to melatonin to help their kids fall – and stay – asleep. Dr. Zallek admits that some pediatricians might recommend melatonin for their patients. She, however, does not, citing concern for the unknowns.

"Melatonin is widely distributed throughout the body. Melatonin is a naturally occurring substance. It's a very normal hormone that we all produce. Some of us have more or less of it, but it helps regulate our internal clock for a lot of things – including sleep – and it has some crosstalk with other hormones. We don't really know what the effect is on children who take it consistently for some time," explains Dr. Zallek.

Because melatonin is sold as an over the counter supplement similar to vitamins, parents may think it's safe to leave on a nightstand or within a child's reach. Dr. Zallek cautions against that. Melatonin is often packaged in kid-enticing forms like gummies, and kids might be tempted to ingest too much without understanding the danger.

In fact, pediatric melatonin ingestions reported to U.S. poison control centers increased 530% from 2012 to 2021. Last year alone, U.S. poison control centers received more than 52,000 calls about children consuming worrisome amounts of the supplement.

"It's incredibly important to keep all medications away from kids, because even an over the counter medication is potentially dangerous," Dr. Zallek warns. "So everything in the wrong dose is dangerous, and kids are curious creatures and might be very apt to try something that you don't know they're taking."

Dr. Zallek urges anyone – adults and kids alike – to speak to their doctor before starting a melatonin routine for sleep. While melatonin has not been found to be habit forming, it doesn't solve the root problem of most sleep issues. There are easy steps you can take to try to curb insomnia without medication. These include:

- **Maintaining the purpose of your bed:** Use your bed only for sleeping and intimacy. When you get in bed, your brain should know it's time to go to sleep.
- **Following a sleep schedule:** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- **Staying active:** Activity is an important sleep hygiene step. However, to avoid restlessness, you should schedule this active time a few hours before you plan on going to bed.
- **Scheduling meals:** Avoid late dinners and late-night snacks, and limit caffeine.

Those with persistent trouble sleeping or sleeplessness should see a [provider who specializes in sleep medicine](#).

Most people with insomnia do not need [medication](#) or a sleep test. A sleep specialist can usually help reduce the issues that might be leading to insomnia, or work around them with sleep-promoting strategies.