



GRAND ROUNDS

You hear it everywhere—a good night’s sleep is an essential component of overall well-being.

If you’re tossing and turning and not getting proper rest, you may want to turn to the RVH sleep laboratory to diagnose what’s at the core of those sleepless nights.

Once a referral has been made by a family doctor, a sleep lab appointment is set up. During a night in the lab, a patient wears more than 20 sensors to measure their sleep, breathing, snoring, heart rate and oxygen, the effort to breathe, and leg movements through the night.

Rachel Leclaire, a registered respiratory therapist, explains the most common diagnosis is obstructive sleep apnea, a temporary stoppage of breathing during sleep. But there are many other disorders she and the RVH team deal with on a regular basis, such as excessive snoring, daytime sleepiness, restless legs at night, REM sleep behaviour disorders and low oxygen levels at night.

The testing can also help patients with complaints such as constant headaches in the morning, irritability, excessive trips to the washroom at night, or night-time sweating.

Anyone having trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep, or experiencing insomnia, is usually having problems because of too much stress in their life, Leclaire says. But she adds that testing is still a good idea, because it may identify other medical factors affecting their quality of sleep.

After testing, sleep lab staff score the results and send the information to Dr. Judith Leech, respirologist and medical director of the sleep disorder program. Based on the findings, Dr. Leech then makes recommendations to the patient’s doctor. Treatment can be anything from medication to something as simple as teaching yourself to sleep on your back.

Those with sleep apnea may be advised to use a CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway

Pressure) machine, which forces air through a nasal mask to keep the airways open. While uncomfortable at first, patients who need the machine are encouraged to use it.

“You have four times the risk of having a stroke if you have sleep apnea,” Leclaire points out, explaining that the syndrome puts a lot of stress on the heart.

And catching more zzz’s snowballs into improving other areas of your health, she says. Better sleep improves things like high blood pressure and levels of depression. And when you’re well rested, you feel more apt to exercise, which in turn improves your quality of sleep.

With our busy lifestyles, Leclaire is finding that many people aren’t making sleep a priority and suffering unnecessarily.

“People really are cheating the amount of sleep they’re getting,” she says, advising everyone to turn off their Blackberrys, televisions, e-mail and cell phones and make bed time a priority again.

If proper rest is still a problem, Leclaire suggests

making a doctor’s appointment and asking about a referral to the sleep lab.

“It really does make a phenomenal difference when these disorders are diagnosed,” she states. “If we don’t get the sleep we need, our quality of life is really affected—our relationships, work, everything suffers.”



Respiratory Therapist Rachel Leclaire with a patient monitor set in the RVH sleep lab.