

By Amy Paturel

melatonin

CAN AMERICA'S FAVORITE NATURAL SLEEP AID ALSO INCREASE YOUR ODDS OF BEATING CANCER? MAYBE—AND THAT'S NOT ALL.



Since being identified as the "sleep hormone" in the '90s, countless Americans have counted on melatonin—a natural hormone that is part of the body's internal clockworks—to put an end to sleepless nights, groggy mornings, jet lag and age-related insomnia. Now, researchers are learning that there's more to this hormone than just a few zzz's.

Perhaps the most intriguing research concerns its potential to help inhibit the growth and spread of breast cancer, and possibly help prevent it. "There's compelling evidence that melatonin enhances the effectiveness of common cancer therapies, particularly the breast cancer drug tamoxifen," says Dave Blask, MD, PhD, senior research scientist at the Bassett Research

Institute in Cooperstown, New York. Other studies show that when combined with certain toxic cancer treatments, melatonin seems to protect the healthy white blood cells and other tissues from damage.

In regard to prevention, studies have found that women who work the night shift and thus are frequently exposed to long hours of light have lower melatonin levels and a higher risk of breast cancer. Although the reason for this is currently unknown, scientists postulate that lower melatonin levels due to light exposure at night—the hormone is secreted in darkness—may be the culprit. This fits with a study published in the July 2005 issue of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, which found that women with higher

melatonin levels are less likely to have breast cancer while those with lower levels are at greater risk.

There may be at least two reasons for these effects. First, researchers suspect that melatonin acts like an antiestrogenic drug—that is, it interferes with overexposure to estrogen, which is linked to breast cancer. Second, some experts speculate that lack of sleep coupled with "light pollution"—extended exposure to light, whether natural or man-made—may be at least partially responsible for the increased risk of cancer in industrialized nations. "Today's 24-hour-a-day society compromises our natural levels of melatonin," Blask says. "[Artificial] light at night interrupts the body's

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natural internal clock and suppresses melatonin production, which may be a risk factor for cancer."

Finally, some studies show that melatonin may also promote heart health, ease gastrointestinal ailments, aid nerve cell damage and alleviate various types of depression, including seasonal affective disorder (SAD). However, definitive doses for countering cancer and other diseases are not yet determined; the research is ongoing and, in some cases, quite preliminary.

Meanwhile, if you just want some help falling asleep, taking a melatonin supplement might be an option.

Experts confirm that taking 0.5mg an hour before bed will advance the onset and quality of sleep. How does it work? Rising melatonin levels tell the body's cells, organs and tissues that the daylight is gone and it's time to wind down for the night. In fact, it's so effective that researchers at Oregon Health & Science University reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 2000 that melatonin even helps blind people, who often suffer from sleep disorders because their sleep/wake cycle cannot be synchronized by external light. It restored normal sleep patterns in six

out of seven sightless subjects tested.

One caveat: Even though studies indicate that melatonin is safe for humans, don't overdo it. Taking too much too often at times other than before bedtime eventually could disrupt the body's natural rhythms. And that could aggravate rather than relieve sleep problems and might encourage or worsen more serious disorders.

"The one thing we can say without equivocation is that it's important to preserve your natural melatonin rhythm," says Blask. "So eat well, take care of yourself and avoid constant light throughout the night." □



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