



Regular Research Articles

Sleep: A Marker of Physical and Mental Health in the Elderly

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Received 8 June 2005, Revised 22 November 2005, Accepted 15 December 2005, Available online 24 January 2013.

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<https://doi.org/10.1097/01.JGP.0000206164.56404.ba> 

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Objective

The objective of this study was to determine the occurrence and recognition of common sleep-related problems and their relationship to health-related quality-of-life measures in the elderly.

Method

A total of 1,503 participants with a mean age of 75.5 ($\pm$ 6.8, range: 62–100) years from 11 primary care sites serving primarily elderly patients were interviewed. Subjects completed a five-item sleep questionnaire and the SF-12. A Physical Component Summary (PCS-12) and Mental Component Summary (MCS-12) score was calculated. A systematic medical chart review was conducted to determine whether sleep problems were identified by the healthcare providers.

Results

A total of 68.9% of patients reported at least one sleep complaint and 40% had two or more. Participants most commonly endorsed (45%) that they had “difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or being able to sleep.” The number and type of sleep problems endorsed was associated with both physical and mental health quality-of-life status. Excessive daytime sleepiness was the best predictor of poor mental and physical health-related quality of life. Even when all five sleep questions were endorsed, a sleep complaint was only reported in the chart 19.2% of the time.

Conclusions

When elicited, sleep complaints predicted the general physical and mental health-related quality-of-life status in elderly populations with comorbid medical and mental illnesses. Yet, questions regarding sleep are not an integral component of most clinical evaluations. Given the growing evidence of a relationship between sleep and health, identification of sleep disorders could lead to improved management of common age-related chronic illnesses and quality of life of elderly patients.

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Sample

The sample for this study was obtained from 11 primary care sites in Illinois that serve a predominantly elderly patient population as part of the Council for Jewish Elderly Partners-in-Care (PIC) project. PIC aims to investigate the medical and psychosocial needs of the elderly and the effects of psychosocial interventions in primary care practice teams. The project includes 11 diverse primary practice sites: seven in the Chicago area and four in downstate Illinois. Data collection began in ...

RESULTS

The average number of sleep problems endorsed was 1.35 ± 1.27 . The average mental health score was 0.75 ± 1.08 and the average physical health score was -0.18 ± 1.00 . Overall, this sample had a substantially higher score for physical health problems (0.75 standard deviations) than the PCS-12 normative sample ($t[1502]=26.6$, $p < 0.001$). This was as expected because the population was being treated through primary care services as a condition of enrollment. In contrast, on average, the present sample ...

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm the high occurrence of sleep disturbances in older adults and demonstrate that elderly patients with poor health are indeed a population at very high risk for poor sleep quality. Symptoms of insomnia such as difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or being able to sleep were the most common sleep complaints endorsed at 45%. Yet, even when a patient answered positively to all of the five sleep questions, indicating both poor sleep quality and daytime ...

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Support for this project was provided by the Council for Jewish Elderly through the sponsorship of Michael Reese Health Trust, The Retirement Research Foundation, Illinois Department on Aging, Washington Square Health Foundation, Foundation for Health Enhancement, The Field Foundation of Illinois, Janssen Pharmaceutical Company, Pfizer Inc., U.S. Pharmaceuticals Group Pharmaceuticals, Eli Lilly and Company, Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corporation, and [1K07 HL03891-02](#), [1P01 AG 11412](#).

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