

SAFE SLEEPING

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A recent news headline screamed “Sex in your sleep? For real!” (US News & World Report website, 6/01/07). It was attached to a press release from a sleep researcher who has been studying bizarre sleep-related disorders for the past 20 years. He reports on several cases where people engaged in sexual behavior (alone or with a partner) while they were sleeping. “Sleepsex”, it turns out, is similar to sleep-walking, in that it occurs while a person is in a sleep state, and will not be remembered upon awakening.

This news item is bound to grab people’s attention (and increase sales of this researcher’s recent book), however, the problem it describes has been documented in the medical and sleep research literature for many years. But what’s really newsworthy, from my perspective, is that **the incidence of sleep-sex (and sleep-eating and sleep-driving) is growing dramatically.**

While it’s not always known what causes these behaviors, classified as “parasomnias”, sleep-driving has been linked with taking sleeping pills, specifically Ambien. Last year Wisconsin officials identified Ambien as a factor in 187 impaired driving arrests between 1999 and 2004. A survey of forensic labs in two dozen states lists Ambien among the top 10 drugs found in impaired drivers. Sleep drivers tend to stand out from other under-the-influence drivers: they are more likely to drive in the wrong direction, crash into poles, walls or other vehicles, and then act completely oblivious to arresting officers.

Sex or driving while asleep may also be triggered by consuming even small amounts of alcohol plus Ambien: there have been instances of people sleep driving or exhibiting other bizarre behavior after having had just 1 or 2 drinks in the evening before taking an Ambien. In the most publicized case of sleep-driving, Rep. Patrick Kennedy crashed his car into a concrete barrier outside the U.S. Capitol after having taken Ambien and Phenergan, a cold medicine.

Recently (3/14/07) the FDA ordered a new warning for 13 sleep medications, not just Ambien, about the risk of sleep-driving and other “complex sleep-related disorders” – like making phone calls, fixing and eating food, as well as engaging in sexual behaviors – which can occur while in a sleep state and that may be a “side effect” of any of these medications. Doctors are warning their patients who take sleeping pills to completely avoid alcohol or other sedating drugs.

So are sleeping pills safe? Probably, if taken as prescribed - no more than 1 pill a night for no more than 3 weeks at a time, taken right before bed – and provided you’ve taken no other sedative or narcotic medication or any alcohol within 2-3 hrs. of bedtime. Safer options for sleep include Melatonin or Benadryl (both of which should also be taken at the lowest dose for the shortest period of time, and not mixed with alcohol), or valerian herbal tea.

The safest option is simply to establish good sleep habits: keep your bedroom cool and dark (like a cave), use a supportive pillow and mattress, and go to bed at the same time every night. Cut back on caffeine and get more fresh air and exercise during the day. In the evening, relax tense muscles with stretching, deep breathing, or a warm bath; and calm your stressed mind with prayer, mediation or “lite” reading. Turn off the TV an hour earlier, and don’t take your laptop or work materials to bed. For more sleep tips, go to www.sleepeducation.com, or check out my article, “Tips for a Good Night’s Sleep”, on my website.