

[IMAGE]

Try Counting Sheep

As you pass middle age, you will likely have more difficulty experiencing deep, undisturbed sleep. Many elderly people also go to bed and wake up earlier than others, which has been blamed on one of the primary hormones regulating the internal sleep clock: melatonin production in the body. In an attempt to normalize their sleep patterns, many of the elderly take melatonin in its supplement form.

Researchers recently investigated the link between sleep patterns and melatonin secretion in the bodies of young and older individuals. They monitored 15 older men and women (averaging 68 years of age) and 33 men in their twenties. Melatonin levels in each person's body were monitored during three nights of sleep. The results appear in the *American Journal of Physiology: Endocrinology and Metabolism*.

Average waking times and bedtimes of the seniors were one hour earlier than those of the younger group. Concurrently, the timing of melatonin release occurred at a significantly earlier hour in the elderly than in the young men. However, the relationship between melatonin levels and sleep timing was different in the older people than in their younger counterparts. Thus, the older group woke at a time when melatonin levels were relatively higher than levels in the younger group at waking time.

The study implies that melatonin may not necessarily trigger sleeping and waking time changes associated with aging. Therefore, melatonin supplementation might not be beneficial for seniors seeking "regular" sleep. Consider allowing your body to follow its natural patterns by avoiding melatonin supplements and accepting an earlier bedtime than you had in your youth.

Reference:

Duffy JF, Zeitzer JM, Rimmer DW, et al. Peak of circadian melatonin rhythm occurs later within the sleep of older subjects. *American Journal of Physiology: Endocrinology and Metabolism* 2002;282, pp. e297-e303.

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