

## **Health Preserving of Chinese medicine – Sleep**

We have to work and rest in our daily lives and the most important mode of rest is sleep. While sleeping, our mind is calm, our body relaxed and our breath and heartbeat well-balanced, allowing us to eliminate fatigue, renew strength and build up energy.

### **1. Sleep duration**

Due to various factors such as body constitution, age and personality, sleep needs vary from person to person, and the deepness and lightness of sleep also differ. For instance, the sleep of adolescents is deep and sound while that of the elderly is light and easily awakened; the sleep duration of fat people is usually longer because more phlegm-damp is accumulated in their bodies whereas the sleep duration of thin people is generally shorter because they are prone to suffer from effulgent vacuity fire. In summary, we should go to bed and get up in due time. The actual sleep duration is determined by individual need and should be sufficient but not excessive.

### **2. Bedroom and bedding**

An appropriate and quiet environment is required for sleeping. The bedroom should be soft-lighted and well ventilated, cool in summer and warm and windproof in winter. It is unadvisable to sleep on a windswept spot or place a furnace at the bedside.

To make it convenient for getting in and out of bed and comfortable for body movement during sleep, the bed should neither be too small nor too low. Bedclothes should agree with the corresponding seasons. For instance, cool mats such as bamboo sheet, rattan mat or Chinese mat-rush may be used in summer, whereas warm and soft cotton comforters or down feather quilts may be used in winter.

The height of the pillow varies with the individual. Normally speaking, the pillow height should be at the same level with the shoulder while lying on the side and make one feel comfortable while lying on the back, which is approximately the height of one fist or one and a half fist. The width should be enough for the head and neck to rest upon and the place where the neck is rested should be a bit higher. There is a great variety of inner pillow stuffing. Filling inner pillow with Chinese herbal medicines allows the smell given off by the medicines to be taken into the body through the nostrils, acupuncture points and pores to exert a health-protection and tranquilising effect. For instance, people suffering from dizziness and vertigo and having effulgent liver fire may use felid cassia, chrysanthemum or green beans shells as stuffing for pillows, whereas children may use millet which, neither cool nor dry, fortifies the spleen, boosts the stomach and is beneficial to the health of children.

### 3. Making adjustment before going to bed

- Avoid being anxious or angry before going to bed

Chinese medicine practitioners hold that “the heart must be at rest before going to bed”, which means that calmness of mind must be maintained before going to bed. Being anxious is harmful to the heart and mind while being angry will give rise to effulgent liver fire and disquieted heart and mind, affecting the quality of sleep. Thus, it is advisable to avoid, as far as possible, being disturbed by vexations before going to bed and to seek relaxation by reading, going for a walk or taking a hot bath, so as to calm the mind and easily fall asleep.

- Talk less before going to bed

Speaking loudly before going to bed harms lung qi, disturbs the heart and mind and stirs up emotions and accordingly affects the quality of sleep. Thus, it is advisable to “stop talking and refrain from speaking when in bed”.

- Don't be abnormally full or hungry before going to bed

Eating or drinking water to excess at night will cause discomfort flatulent feeling or excessive passage of urine and affect the quality of sleep; however, hungry feeling may arouse the desire for food and drink, making it hard to fall asleep. Thus, it is advisable to be abstemious in eating and drinking at dinner, and the time between dinner and bedtime should be a certain period apart; moreover, the food should be light and easily digestible and irritating drinks such as strong tea or coffee should be minimised, so as to avoid being too excited to fall asleep and to reduce the frequency of toilet visits at night time.

#### 4. Sleeping postures

Chinese medicine practitioners consider that “human and nature should correspond to each other”. Hence, the head should face east or southeast while sleeping so as to preserve health by adapting to the generation of yang qi.

There are many kinds of sleep postures, among which lying on the right side “like a bow” is the best. It is because while lying on the right side, the limbs and trunk are naturally bent, allowing the muscles and bones of the whole body to relax and the viscera and hollow organs to remain in a natural position, and is thus favourable for relieving fatigue and keeping the airway and blood vessels clear. However, sleeping position is never fixed as the body will unconsciously turn around in sleep. Hence, there is no need to persist in sleeping in a definite position, and the guideline to be taken is a position which helps one fall into a comfortable sleep easily and naturally.

#### 5. Afternoon nap benefits health

Health preserving of Chinese medicine suggests having ‘midnight-midday sleep’, which means one should be sleeping during midnight hours and may take a nap during noon hours

so as to make up for insufficient sleep at night, benefit health and enhance the learning and working efficiency in the afternoon. Generally speaking, a nap should be taken half an hour after lunch and after a little activity to give the food in the stomach time to digest. The duration of the nap may range from around 15 minutes to one hour and caution must be taken to avoid catching cold.

Chinese Medicine Board of the Department of Health  
July 2007

References:

1. MA Youdu (ed.), 1983, *家庭中醫顧問*, People's Medical Publishing House
2. ZHANG Qiwen (ed.), 1989, *實用中醫保健學*, People's Medical Publishing House
3. MENG Jingchun (ed.), 1992, *中醫養生康復學概論*, 上海科技出版社
4. LI Qingxing (ed.), 1996, *中醫養生學*, 科技出版社
5. WANG Xinxiang (ed.), 1997, *中醫防病與養生*, 四川科技出版社