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EDUCATION

Melatonin supplements leave some physicians wary of side effects

By Heidi Pesterfield
SPECIAL TO HEALTH SOURCE

When the hormone supplement melatonin hit the U.S. market four years ago, people with insomnia – desperate for a good night sleep and looking for a fast fix – rushed to retail shelves and began to create what has now become a \$350 million market.

Many members of the medical profession have since been wary of the supplement, claiming that not enough solid evidence of its safety exists for them to feel comfortable recommending it to patients. They are concerned that melatonin in high doses, while causing no immediate harm, could have unknown ill-effects on the body. Even one milligram is three times the amount the body produces normally.

Reno family practitioner Christi Bonds, M.D., is strongly against the casual, long-term over-the-counter use of melatonin and any other hormone supplements for that matter.

"Hormones are very, very powerful drugs," she cautions, "and I'm very concerned (they) may be harmful in the long run if a person takes them regularly."

Bonds works primarily from a Chinese medicine standpoint, integrating both Western and Eastern medical philosophies. Along with unknown long-term effects of melatonin, she is acutely aware that because melatonin is not a controlled drug, there is virtually no incentive for research to be done to prove its safety.

"Most research is performed by prescription drug companies because of their desire to market the drug and make money," she says. Since melatonin is available without a prescription, there's no incentive to provide hard and fast research to practitioners. Bonds also is concerned about what she refers to as "uneven" quality assurance within melatonin manufacturers who are not required to follow specific, standardized regulations or standards to follow.

Manufacturers on the other hand, are

anxious to prove its safety and effectiveness to the 20 million Americans who still take the supplement. But new evidence on melatonin, good or bad, remains scarce. The most extensive clinical trial to date involves a high dose of 75 milligrams per day given to 1,400 women in the Netherlands for up to four years with no reported side effects and no signs of toxicity. Another recent research project indicates that melatonin may be effective in helping with sleep patterns by decreasing the body's core temperature.

Melatonin is a hormone the body secretes to regulate its sleep-wake cycles. It registers as darkness falls, and is literally responsible for controlling the body's "internal time clock." The amount individuals produce seems to decrease with age. Perhaps these are all reasons why melatonin is an attractive solution for the elderly, night-shift workers and travelers suffering from jet lag.

Melatonin is secreted by the pineal

gland in the center of the-brain. It is derived from an essential amino acid that the body makes from its absorption of tryptophan.

Tryptophan can only be obtained from foods we eat, such as broccoli, milk and some meats. As the body consumes tryptophan during the day, it converts it to serotonin, which in turn is converted to melatonin.

Also notable is the fact that since melatonin became available on the market, only four complaints of its use have been reported to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. These revealed possible side effects of a slower reaction time and drowsiness after use.

The most recent reports on the side effects of melatonin were announced this year at a National Health Institute meeting on melatonin. Doctors and scientists discussed the following possible side effects of its prolonged use: hypothermia, reduced fertility (it can prevent ovulation), suppression of male sex drive and damage to the retina of the eye.