Proper sleep is exceptionally important for both physical and mental health. Sleep is when our body repairs itself, our mind takes a break and we finally get to turn off. Studies continue to show that poor sleep is correlated with a dramatic increase in health problems. If you are one of the many people who has trouble either falling asleep, staying asleep or getting enough sleep, this could lead to a number of health issues including:

- Premature aging
- Weight gain
- Lack of mental clarity/focus
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Irregular heartbeats
- Stroke
- Mood irregularities (depression, anxiety...)
- Heart failure
- Heart attack
- Lack of sex drive
Healthy sleep habits are very important. There are a few things that one can do to improve his or her chances of quality sleep.

1. Create a sleep environment that promotes sleep only. This means get rid of the TV, books, food and whatever else might distract you from sleep in the bedroom.

2. Limit caffeine, alcohol and nicotine. If you are someone who is very sensitive to caffeine then limit yourself to one cup of coffee or tea in the morning or skip it entirely. Like caffeine, nicotine is also a stimulant so avoid consuming tobacco products before bed. Alcohol may induce sleep, however, it later acts as a stimulant leading to more waking throughout the night and poor sleep quality.

3. Install black out blinds to ensure the room is dark enough; this can be particularly helpful for shift workers. It is also important to make sure one's sleep space is quiet. White noise or earplugs can help to achieve this if necessary.

4. Exercise! There are many studies showing the benefits of exercise for those who have issues with sleep. The best time to exercise for improving sleep is in the afternoon. Avoid exercising within 3 hours of going to sleep as exercise induces cortisol secretion, which is stimulating.

5. Reduce Stress. Irregular cortisol (stress hormone) rhythms can wreak havoc with sleep. Cortisol is supposed to be low at night and rise in the morning. This is part of what causes us to wake up. For those who are under stress, cortisol may be out of whack and cause issues falling asleep or staying asleep.

6. Avoid food right before bed. Try and finish your evening meal at least 3 hours before you go to bed.

Aside from the above suggestions, there are also natural compounds available that can help to promote relaxation and sleep. These are a much better alternative to the pharmaceutical sleep aids that can often become addictive and have negative side-effects. Some ingredients to look for are:

**L-Theanine**

This is a non-protein amino acid found mostly in tea leaves. Studies have show that L-Theanine can be helpful for lowering anxiety and stress levels. An effective dosage for this purpose was found to be anywhere between 50-200mg. L-Theanine can also help to lower blood pressure by decreasing levels of norepinephrine. Aside from the calming properties of L-Theanine, it has been shown in some studies to enhance the anti-tumour activity of several anti-cancer drugs.

**GABA**

This is another non-protein amino acid that acts as the main inhibitory neurotransmitter in the central nervous system. Many pharmaceuticals used for calming will act on GABA receptors to exert their anxiolytic and sedative effects. GABA is a product of bacterial fermentation of various foods. Aside from being used for anxiety and sleep, GABA is also used as an anti-convulsive and anti-hypertensive supplement.

**L-5-HTP**

This is a precursor to Serotonin, the happy hormone, and Serotonin is a precursor to Melatonin, the hormone that helps us to fall asleep. L-5-HTP is also commonly used for depression and anxiety. One study with insomniacs used a combination of GABA and L-5-HTP and this combination significantly decreased the amount of time it took to fall asleep as well as increased the length of sleep.

**Valerian**

This herb is generally used to help those with sleep disorders. Studies have found that taking Valerian approximately 2 hours before bed can improve quality of sleep by 1.4 to 1.8 times. It also helps increase the onset of sleep by 14-17 minutes. Another study found that when used in combination with Hops, sleep quality was further improved. Valerian has also been found to be effective as an anxiolytic.

**Passion flower**

Traditionally passion flower has many uses including: insomnia, treatment of gastrointestinal upsets related to anxiety, general anxiety disorder, seizures, palpitations, high blood pressure, pain relief and ADHD. Clinical evidence has shown that taking passion flower before going to sleep increases sleep quality measures. For use in anxiety, studies have found that passionflower can be as effective as some anti-anxiety pharmaceutical drugs.

**Hops**

When most people think of Hops, they think of beer. However, Hops has many medicinal uses other than just adding flavour to your favourite brew. Hops is used to treat insomnia and other sleep disorders, anxiety, ADHD, restlessness and irritability. It is also commonly used in digestive health to increase appetite, as a bitter tonic and to treat indigestion. Preliminary sleep studies have found that combining Hops and Valerian can increase sleep quality and quality of life to the same degree as prescription medication in individuals with sleep disorders.
**Melatonin**

This is a neurohormone found in the body. Melatonin is synthesized and released by the pineal gland in response to darkness and blood levels are highest at bedtime. Melatonin is involved in regulating the body's circadian rhythms. Shift workers who need to sleep during the day, when natural melatonin levels are suppressed by daylight, often find great benefit from supplementation. Melatonin helps to initiate sleep, improve sleep quality, reduce sleep wake cycle disturbances and addresses circadian rhythm sleep disturbances. There is also preliminary evidence for the use of melatonin in high doses for various types of cancer.

**Magnesium bisglycinate**

Magnesium is a natural muscle relaxant and can help calm the body to encourage sleep. When magnesium is bound to glycine in the magnesium bisglycinate form, it has the added therapeutic effects of the amino acid glycine. Glycine is used for calming and to treat anxiety. Magnesium bisglycinate will help to relax the body and mind to initiate sleep.

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The combination of the botanicals, neurotransmitters and minerals discussed target all areas of the sleep process. If one implements proper sleep hygiene and that does not sufficiently solve the sleep problem, then a product with a comprehensive spectrum of the ingredients discussed is the best approach to ensuring an individual's sleep issue is addressed.
• Helps to temporarily promote relaxation
• Helps relieve nervousness (calmative/sedative)
• Helps to promote sleep
• (Passion flower) Traditionally used in Herbal Medicine as a sleep aid (in cases of restlessness or insomnia due to mental stress)
• Helps to reduce the time it takes to fall asleep (sleep onset latency aspect of sleep quality) in people with delayed sleep phase disorder
• Helps re-set the body’s sleep-wake cycle (aspect of the circadian rhythm)
• Used as a sleep aid