

## MEDICAL NEWS TODAY

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### Sleep Problems Get In The Way Of Alcoholism Recovery

The first few months of recovery from an alcohol problem are hard enough. But they're often made worse by serious sleep problems, caused by the loss of alcohol's sedative effects, and the long-term sleep-disrupting impact that alcohol dependence can have on the brain.

Now, a new study gives further evidence that insomnia and other sleep woes may actually get in the way of recovery from alcohol problems. In fact, a person's perception of how bad their sleep problems are may be just as important as the actual sleep problems themselves, the study suggests.

The study is published in the new issue of the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, by a team from the University of Michigan's Department of Psychiatry. They report the results of a small but thorough evaluation of sleep, sleep perception and alcohol relapse among 18 men and women with insomnia who were in the early stages of alcohol recovery.

The authors say their results show how important it is for alcohol recovery patients, and those who are helping them through their recovery, to discuss sleep disturbances and seek help. Often, sleep isn't discussed in alcohol recovery programs - but it should be, they stress.

In fact, members of the U-M team have now launched a new study that aims to help those who have just entered treatment for alcohol problems, and are having trouble sleeping. Instead of using sleep medications, which can carry their own risk of addiction, it's based on a series of "talk therapy" sessions with a trained sleep therapist who can help patients change behaviors and patterns of thinking that contribute to sleep problems.

In the meantime, the newly published results add to the understanding of how alcohol and sleep intertwine. "What we found is that those patients who had the biggest disconnect between their perception of how they slept and their actual sleep patterns were most likely to relapse," says lead author Deirdre Conroy, Ph.D., who led the study as a fellow in the U-M Addiction Research Center.

**"This suggests that long-term drinking causes something to happen in the brain that interferes with both sleep and perception of sleep. If sleep problems aren't addressed, the risk of relapse may be high."**

**Conroy and her former mentor, U-M alcoholism researcher Kirk Brower, M.D., conducted the study in cooperation with the sleep researchers of the U-M Sleep and Chronophysiology Laboratory, the U-M Sleep Disorders Center, and U-M Addiction Treatment Services. She is now at the McLaren Sleep Diagnostic Center.**

**"We are now interested in what brain mechanisms are involved in the disrupted sleep of alcohol-dependent individuals," says Brower, who has previously led studies illustrating the prevalence of sleep disorders among people with alcohol dependence and abuse issues, and their correlation with relapse back into drinking. He is the executive director of the U-M Addiction Treatment Services, which provides alcohol and drug treatment to hundreds of patients each year.**

**The new study involved women who had volunteered for a randomized clinical trial of gabapentin, an experimental treatment for alcohol dependence. Each one started the trial when they had been off alcohol for about a week.**

**The volunteers spent two separate nights in the sleep-monitoring area of the U-M General Clinical Research Center, wearing electrodes on their head and body that measured their brain waves during sleep, as well as their breathing, muscle activity and heart rhythm. The detailed measurements, which together make up a procedure called polysomnography, allowed the researchers to determine when the volunteers were sleeping, when they were awake, and which stage of sleep they were in.**

**These sleep data were compared with the participants' answers on morning evaluations of how they slept - including how long they thought it took them to fall asleep, how long they were awake in the night, and other measures. The two nights of sleep monitoring were done several weeks apart. The researchers also asked the participants to report any alcohol they drank during the six weeks following each sleep test.**

**In all, the patients overestimated how long it took them to fall asleep, but thought they had been awake in the middle of the night for far less time than they actually were. These perceptions about how they slept were actually more accurate in predicting their potential for relapse to alcohol use than were the actual sleep measurements.**

**"Our study suggests that in early recovery from alcoholism, people perceived that it took them a long time to fall asleep and that they slept through the night," says Conroy. "The reality was that it did not take them as long to fall asleep as they thought it did, and their brain was awake for a large portion of the night. On average, the participants that were less accurate about how they were sleeping were more likely to return to drinking."**

**Conroy explains that poor sleep quality can lead to mood disturbances. "If recovering alcoholics are irritable because they are not getting quality sleep at night, they might be more vulnerable to return to drinking," she says. "Previous studies show that non alcoholics with insomnia actually think they are sleeping worse than they are, so they may be more likely to seek appropriate treatment. Our study shows that an alcoholic in early recovery has a lot of wakefulness in the night but they are not necessarily picking up on this. It is important for the clinician working with the alcohol-dependent patient to have a differential of poor sleep quality in the back of their mind as a potential challenge for the patient throughout alcohol recovery."**