

# Family Guide to Sleeping Medications for Persons with MR/DD

Problems with sleep are common in persons with mental retardation. Persons with mild mental retardation may have difficulty falling asleep and persons with moderate to severe may have their days and nights mixed up. Families should monitor patients and tell their doctor whether they snore loudly or stop breathing while asleep. Health problems, pain, hunger, and seizures can disrupt sleep.

## **Treatment of Sleep Disorder**

Sleeping pills work by sedating the patient. Sedating medication can cause confusion and other health problems such as falls or difficulty with swallowing. The family must consider possible side effects from sleeping pills before they purchase over-the-counter medications or ask a physician for a prescription.

Most over-the-counter sleeping pills, like benadryl, contain a medication called diphenhydramine. This medication produces drowsiness and increases the risk for accidents. The warning on the side of the bottle counsels against driving or operating dangerous equipment while using the other problems, e.g., constipation. Families should be very careful about using over-the-counter preparations to assist with sleep.

Prescriptions drugs that help with sleep often produce excessive sedation, daytime confusion, and other health problems. Most sleeping pills are from the “benzodiazepine” family of medications. These drugs act in a way similar to alcohol. Some persons who receive these drugs become intoxicated and develop behavioral problems.

Sleeping pills wear out after about six weeks to two months of nightly use. Patients may become resistant to the medication but the sleep problems grow worse when you do not give them the pill.

Most sleep problems in mildly retarded persons respond to simple interventions such as keeping the patient awake during the daytime, treating pain, avoiding heavy caffeine, and other common sense actions. Families should be very cautious about requesting or administering sleeping pills except for very brief periods of time.

There are no free lunches with sleeping pills. Every medicine has a significant side effect and the risk of the medicine must be always measured against the possible benefit to the patient.