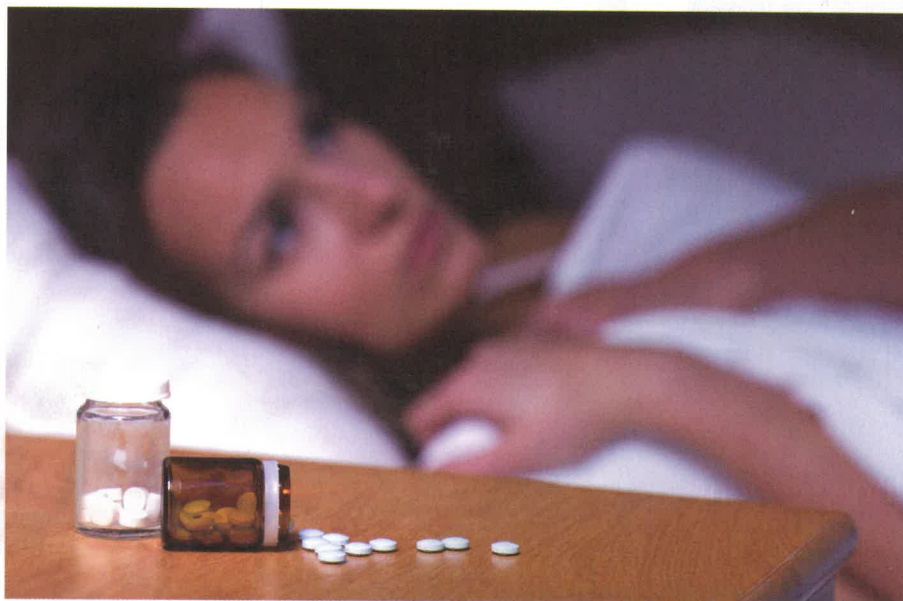


# Dream World

**For 50 years, the Cooper Clinic has focused on nutrition and physical fitness. Now it has added a good night's sleep to its preventive wellness menu.**



## Don't Sleep on Treatment

The occasional restless night or some light snoring is normal. But if your sleep issues affect your daytime functioning, you should have a sleep evaluation. "If you're late to work because you just can't get yourself out of bed in the morning, you're irritable, you're sick all the time, you're falling asleep in meetings or religious services, you're really having trouble functioning—that is when you absolutely must consult a physician and not just try to self-medicate with the occasional melatonin or Tylenol PM," Dr. Sonya Merrill says. It's also important to get checked out if you develop other medical problems, such as high blood pressure, weight gain, cardiac issues, or Type 2 diabetes, along with your sleep difficulties.

**D**r. Sonya Merrill of the Cooper Clinic confirms what we already knew: the pandemic wreaked havoc on our sleeping habits. Illness itself played a small role, but it was the lifestyle changes that accompanied shelter-in-place orders—physical inactivity, increased technology use, anxiety and uncertainty, and disrupted schedules—that got most of us off track. Day and night lost their meaning in that strange space outside of time, and returning to standard social and office hours has proven challenging. This matters because, Merrill says, "Sleep is the foundation on which health and wellness, both mental and physical, is built."

Merrill arrived at sleep medicine in a roundabout way. She was drawn to psychiatry to help serve people with mental illness, but she found she missed the more physical, hands-on side of medicine. During an internal medicine residency at Texas Health Dallas (then Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas), her mentors inspired her to pursue a pulmonary critical care fellow-

ship. They advised her to fill the one-year gap between her residency and the fellowship with a one-year sleep medicine fellowship. "Sleep apnea's becoming a real problem," they told her. Two-thirds of the way through the program, she realized that she had found her niche, a practice that involves both mental and physical care.

During Merrill's 15 years in solo private practice at Dallas Sleep Medicine Specialists, she often received referrals from physicians at the Cooper Clinic in Dallas. For more than 50 years, the center has focused on preventive wellness, establishing two key pillars of health—physical fitness and nutrition—to help head illness off at the pass. "But the third leg of the stool, so to speak, needs to be sleep," Merrill says. Realizing the value she could add to their team, the Cooper Clinic brought her aboard last summer.

The two most common sleep disorders she treats are insomnia—trouble initiating and/or maintaining sleep—and sleep-disordered breathing. "Sleep apnea" is the more common term, but there are various forms of sleep apnea, so "sleep-disordered breathing" is kind of a bigger category," she says. Both issues are increasingly common,

which Merrill attributes in part to Western culture and behaviors. Obesity is a major cause of obstructive sleep apnea, and increased reliance on technology, especially devices that emit harmful blue light, corresponds with increases in insomnia. These two issues are also not cut and dried; they often present together or with complex histories of trauma or illness. Each case has to be treated differently.

The good news is that many patients seem to have readjusted well to normal sleep rhythms postpandemic, indicating that their sleep disruption was a transient issue. Those still having trouble should beware of doctors whose automatic response to sleep issues is to prescribe sleeping pills without investigating the underlying causes. Merrill also cautions against sleep clinicians who sell CPAP machines to their patients.

"I have never sold anything to a patient," she says. "I don't want there to ever be the appearance of a conflict of interest." Doctors who sell equipment may default to that option, but no one treatment can be applied to all patients. Instead, look for someone who listens and treats holistically—both body and mind. **D**