

# Why You Can't Sleep

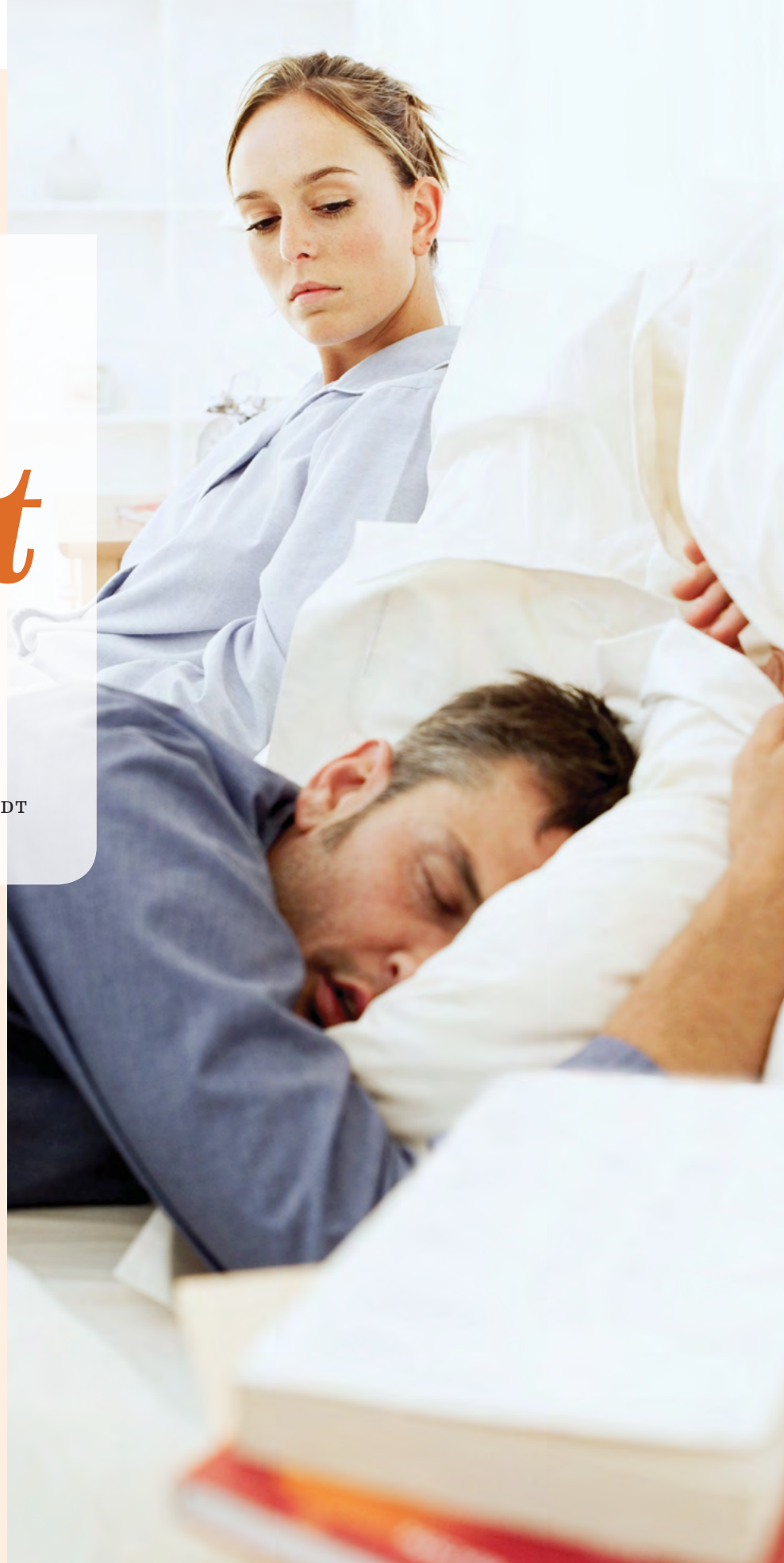
What's keeping you up at night—and should you worry?

BY SAM MITTELSTEADT

**WHEN IT COMES TO SLEEP HOURS**, most of us are always looking for more—not just quantity but quality, too. If you find yourself wound up about the right way to wind down, it might be time to relax! Let's check off a few things that might help you rest assured.

## IS SOMETHING ELSE GOING ON? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Stress at work or home can be an obvious culprit—who *hasn't* lain in bed at night pondering an earlier event?—but conditions such as depression, cardiac issues and diabetes also can lead to poor sleep. Certain medications, supplements and even vitamins have been linked to sleep loss, too, which is why it's wise to consult a physician if you've had trouble falling asleep for more than two weeks.



## DID YOU EXERCISE TODAY?

☐ YES ☐ NO

Daily physical activity ranging from light walking to intense weightlifting can help alleviate stress and relieve insomnia, but studies don't agree whether invigorating evening exercise could hinder restfulness when it's time to sack out. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine suggests keeping a six-hour window between exercise and sleep, just in case. But those who have to hit the gym after work can take comfort: "In surveys and experiments, most people have not had disturbed sleep following exercise, even ending 30 minutes before bedtime," says Sean Youngstedt, Ph.D., an associate professor of exercise science at the University of South Carolina.

## ARE YOU INADVERTENTLY MAKING IT WORSE?

☐ YES ☐ NO

"We often think if we haven't done something well—even sleep!—then we haven't tried hard enough," says Christina Smith McCrae, Ph.D., president of the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine. "But when people *try* to sleep, that interferes with the sleep process itself." Anxiety about not sleeping well the night before can lead a person to lie awake night after night, worrying about whether she'll be able to fall asleep. At that point, the insomnia "is no longer tied to any stress that started it," McCrae says. "It's become a problem in its own right."

## DO YOU REALLY NEED TO TOTALLY UNPLUG?

☐ YES ☐ NO

An end-of-day ritual or routine can help both mind and body relax and prepare for bed, according to the sleep academy, but it may not be necessary to block TV viewing or online browsing before bedtime. (During a recent study, older

teens fell asleep only  $7\frac{1}{2}$  minutes after playing nearly an hour's worth of the action-packed online role-playing war game *Call of Duty IV*.) Sure, some of us can't fall asleep when a TV is on because our brains can't tune out the noise, but others can nod off midprogram.

Nobody falls asleep the same way; no universal routine works across the board. But if you're having trouble sleeping, it never hurts to experiment with some changes, like nixing caffeine in the evening, swapping out a book for pre-bedtime TV or taking a warm bath before bed.

## IS MORE ALWAYS BETTER?

☐ YES ☐ NO

We always hear about getting your eight hours, but "there are 'long sleepers' and 'short sleepers,'" says McCrae. "It's about the best total sleep time *for you*," she says. Circadian rhythm varies from person to person—and over a lifetime, the amount of sleep we need tends to decrease.

(Or we'd all still be out for roughly 16 hours a day, like newborns.)

McCrae also stresses that the best sleep is consolidated into a single block, without repeated or long awakenings. That means no lying in bed for 10 hours, knowing that you'll toss and turn for two before finally dropping off. "You can set the conditions for sleep to occur, but you can't make yourself sleep," she says. 🌸



## Whet Your App-etite

White noise apps like aSleep may help block distracting sounds and lead to better, deeper slumber. Search "sleep" in Apple and Android app stores to find choices that range in price from free to \$9.99.