



deep sleep

A recent study claims sleeping pills can increase the risk of premature death but fails to show the reasons why

BY DR. ART HISTER



Alas, I get up at 5:50 a.m. every morning for my daily media gigs. Because the pressure is on to be asleep by 10 p.m. at the latest (I need eight hours' sleep to look so damn good), I often have trouble drifting off because I'm still too wired. Yet this is never

a problem if I'm invited to a party because I'm at that age when a party is the best remedy to ensure I'm totally ready for bed by 8 p.m. Anyway, like many of you, once or twice a week, I use a sleeping pill to help me fall asleep.

So, I certainly sat up and paid attention — as did many of you, I'm sure

— when a recent headline screamed: "Sleeping pills can increase the risk of death."

'Yikes,' I thought, 'and I so wanted to still be around for when Translink finally builds that Evergreen Line in 2034.'

So what does that study in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* really mean?

Well, I for one don't think it's as bad as the headlines implied.

First, the background: In this study, a researcher

Those drugs also affect reaction time, and combined with feeling drowsier, that leads to a higher risk of falling, especially at nighttime. And falls are, of course, a major health hazard for seniors.

The big problem with the headline-grabbing conclusion, though, is that it seems to me people who take sleeping pills and anxiolytics may be more at risk of dying prematurely from whatever is causing their anxiety and sleeping

People may be more at risk from whatever is causing their anxiety and sleeping problems in the first place

reviewed health surveys done regularly on Canadians from 1994 to 2007 and concluded that people who took sleeping pills or anxiety-relieving pills (anxiolytics) had a 36 per cent higher risk of dying over the course of the study, compared with people who never took such drugs.

And it's pretty easy to see how the use of sleeping pills and anxiolytics might raise the risk of premature death. For a start, those drugs make you drowsy (duh!), so if you use a motor vehicle while the drug's effects are still hitting, you are clearly more at risk of being in a motor vehicle accident.

problems in the first place.

In other words, it might be that it's their underlying illness and not the drugs they use that cause people who take sleeping pills and anxiolytics to have a higher risk of premature death.

So, I'm not throwing my sleeping pills away just yet, because I figure that lack of sleep is a bigger threat to my health than falling on the way to the toilet at 1 a.m. And 3 a.m. And 5 a.m.

But I've promised my wife to be very careful on those multiple nighttime toilet trips. ■

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