

Can't Sleep? Read This

By [WILLIAM L. HAMILTON](#)

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TRY this sometime. Plaster about two dozen electrodes to your face and head and tape some more to your chest and legs. Give yourself two to three feet of wire on each, and attach the other ends to the wall next to a bed, so they tug tightly when you move. Make sure the bed is in a room that you've never seen before, something that looks like a hospital room disguised as a hotel room. A kind of Soviet-era bugged spy box for information gathering, with a video camera, pointed at the bed, blinking silently from the ceiling.

Then turn out the lights and go to sleep.

I'm not a very cooperative lab rat, but this would describe a typical night at a sleep clinic, where data is gathered on how you sleep. This describes my night at the Center for Sleep Medicine at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in Manhattan. I woke up the next morning at 7 with someone misting my head. That softens the glue on the electrodes. On the subway ride home I looked like an escapee, discs of plaster crusted on my skull. Just another alien abduction.

I have joined the national discussion on sleep, a statistic in what is being called an epidemic of sleeplessness, or the growing perception that in bed, extracurriculars aside, we're not being our personal best.

It is a discussion being conducted in doctors' offices, at dinner tables, on Web sites like talkaboutsleeeep.com and sandiegodreamcatchers.org, and in chat rooms, where people call themselves "midnightclyde" and "sleepymoon."

"Nutrition, physical fitness, now sleep," said Dr. William C. Dement, director of the Sleep Disorders Clinic and Research Center at Stanford University, of the modern history of the American obsession with wellness.

Dr. Dement, who basically founded the idea of sleep medicine, is, at 77, the Sandman. He said the only periods during which he ever recalling losing sleep were when applying for grant money. "Twenty-five years ago everyone started jogging, worried about fitness," he said. "Now sleep is having its moment. Ninety percent of your waking health is dependent on your sleep."

Since 1970, when Dr. Dement founded his clinic, the nation's first, sleep has spawned university departments, associations, journals, conventions, academies and foundations like the National Sleep Foundation, which declared last week National Sleep Awareness week, ending today with daylight saving time, when we lose an hour of sleep by the clock whether we normally snooze with the gods or not.

Like many others, I complained to my doctor of poor sleep, and of tiredness during the day. He prescribed a sleep evaluation, to be conducted at a sleep clinic.

With baby boomers again leading the charge (I'm 54; you lose your natural gift for sleep as you age), sleep has become a commercial industry. In addition to pills (more popular than ever), breathing masks, nose pillows, hypnotic podcasts, aromatherapies and specialty bedding, there are sleep clinics like Mount Sinai's, which are proliferating.

With a tantalizing promise of self-improvement, like a day spa crossed with a night class, accredited facilities in the United States have tripled in number, to 963, in the last 10 years. (There are roughly 900 more unaccredited centers.) Sleep doctors warn that a shortage of trained, certified personnel like the technicians who administer the overnight testing could be sleep's next crisis.

"Think you have a sleep disorder?" asks the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, which accredits sleep centers, at its Web site, www.aasmnet.org. "Find a sleep center near you!"

Dr. Stasia J. Wieber, director of the Comprehensive Center for Sleep Medicine at Mount Sinai, said of evaluations: "A lot of people do it because their friends did it. But we only do an overnight sleep study when it's indicated. Everyone leaves with a diagnosis, but not everyone gets thrown into the lab. A physician has to order the study."

The overnight evaluation at Mount Sinai costs \$1,500; most insurance companies cover it.

I arrived at 8 in the evening with an overnight bag, filled out a form on my sleep habits to determine my overall sleep "hygiene," then changed into my nightwear (tattered workout clothes) and sat in a chair watching "Armageddon" without sound on a corner television while a technician worked behind me, wiring my head.

Mount Sinai also evaluates pediatric sleep disorders. Down the hall, someone sang a lullaby, with the soft disembodiment that foreshadows horrible events in movies. On the television Bruce Willis said goodbye to Earth, his finger on the bomb.