

**SLEEP DOCTOR** -- When patients meet with **Dr. Lawrence Epstein**, they hope the conversation will put them to sleep.

Epstein, 49, is board-certified in internal medicine, treating pulmonary disease, and critical care, but it is the newly recognized subspecialty of sleep medicine that gets him out of bed in the morning.

Epstein is president of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, which played a key role in establishing an accredited training program in sleep medicine. "If you now want to be a sleep clinician, you have to do a fellowship just as a cardiologist or pulmonologist does," he said.

Epstein is also the regional medical director for Sleep HealthCenters. His office is in **Newton**, where he sees patients suffering from narcolepsy, sleep apnea, insomnia, and parasomnias, including sleepwalking and sleep eating.

"One of the things that I enjoy about sleep medicine is that I think it's one of the few branches of medicine that I like to call 'happy medicine,' like obstetrics," he said. "When I was taking care of patients with pulmonary disorders, they had cancer or emphysema -- you could help them, but not dramatically reverse their condition. With sleep medicine, sometimes you can dramatically change a person's life so they're incredibly happy."

Epstein recalls one patient who came in with restless legs syndrome, a neurological problem characterized by an uncontrollable urge to move that makes it nearly impossible to drift off to sleep.

"They get tired all the time; they're uncomfortable. It's difficult to go to a movie or even sit on an airplane," he said of those with the syndrome. "I started a patient on medication, and the next time I saw him, he said, 'You've changed my life.'"

Epstein has had the same experience with patients who have sleep apnea, a disorder characterized by cessation of breathing during sleep. "Patients are so tired that they can't work; they're sleeping 9 or 10 hours and are still [exhausted] all day long. After treatment, they're awake, alert, have energy, can exercise, and say they feel they have a whole new lease on life."

Epstein says he mostly sees people in their 30s to 50s, though he sees pockets of other age groups, depending on the disorder. For example, narcolepsy -- a continuous feeling of sleepiness -- often first occurs when people are in their 20s.

Epstein said sleep problems tend to creep up in middle age. "As you get older, it takes longer to fall asleep and sleep is less continuous with more awakenings," he said. "The amount of time spent in the different stages of sleep also changes with less time spent in slow-wave sleep, the most restorative sleep stage."

As people age, they may need slightly less sleep, but it becomes harder to obtain it in a continuous nighttime block.

Epstein admits that some disorders are difficult to diagnose, such as sleep eating. "It's the same sort of thing as sleepwalking, in which you do some sort of behavior during sleep but have no recollection the following day," he said.

Several young women have complained to him of feeling bloated in the morning and then discovering food strewn all over the kitchen. Not surprisingly, they also report daytime sleepiness and weight gain despite dieting and exercising.

"The food they eat is very strange: peanut butter on fish or some combination that they'd never [otherwise] eat," he said.

Epstein said treatment usually combines therapy with medication.

Epstein said his personal sleep problems generally arise when he's under stress.

"One time I remember was when I was trying to decide whether or not to take a new job, another was when I was debating moving to a new city, and again when there was an illness in my family," he said.

"By keeping to my usual routine, I was able to avoid the short-term problem turning into a long-term one." The routine?

Epstein sets aside quiet time at the end of the day. He has a glass of milk and a cookie, and reads for 10 or 15 minutes before turning off the light between 10:30 and 11.

Epstein, who lives in Brookline with his wife and two sons, is working on a book called "A Guide to Healthy Sleep."

For sleep tips, visit the American Academy of Sleep Medicine website, [www.sleepeducation.com](http://www.sleepeducation.com).

Send people items to [slebovits@globe.com](mailto:slebovits@globe.com).

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