



## Melatonin, Sleep Disturbance, And Cancer Risk

*by Sue Purvis, R.Ph.*

Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland that is involved in circadian regulation (biorhythm) and facilitation of sleep, the inhibition of cancer, and enhancement of immune function. Recent studies from Tulane University and the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute indicate that individuals such as night shift workers who are exposed to light at night on a regular basis not only have disruptions in sleep, biological rhythm and nocturnal melatonin suppression, but are at increased risk for immune system suppression and cancer. Studies suggest that a shortened duration of nighttime sleep and low melatonin levels are associated with a higher risk of breast cancer development. Because melatonin can modulate estrogen-dependent pathways related to breast cancer development, as well as reduce free radicals to prevent cell mutations, melatonin may have a potential use in breast cancer prevention and treatment. Because melatonin production is a light-sensitive process, getting undisturbed, high quality sleep, and perhaps even more importantly uninterrupted darkness, may be previously unappreciated methods of cancer prevention.



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