



EXPERT INTERVIEW

Dr. Lauren Noel

Naturopath



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Lauren: I am Dr. Lauren Noel. I am a licensed naturopathic doctor and expert in natural medicine. My areas of expertise are digestive disorders, thyroid and hormone imbalances, and also using primal nutrition with my patients. I got into naturopathic medicine for many reasons but the main one is I was sick myself many years ago. When I was in high school, I was affected by a thyroid problem and digestive issues – pretty much everything I specialize in now. I was just frustrated with conventional health care. I went through many doctors and never got really the answers that I sought.

It wasn't until years later that I saw a naturopathic doctor for myself and was finally led to real answers. I finally was able to rebuild my body and was healthier than before I got sick. So I was really inspired by that. I wanted to be the kind of doctor that I wish I had had when I was sick. I also wanted to protect my friends and family from not being treated appropriately. So that's what really inspired me.

My passion is food as medicine. I love using nutrition from a medicinal perspective. I think every single time you eat a meal you can have medicine on your plate that can heal and rebuild your body. Nutrition also can do harm as well. That's the perspective I use with all my patients. Using nutrition, I've been able to help my patients rebuild their bodies from many different "incurable conditions," as they are called. I've also used natural treatments to help with that process as well. So it's a very rewarding job and I absolutely love what I do.

I'm also the host of Dr. Lo Radio, a popular podcast on iTunes. You can learn more about me at drlaurennoel.com and drloradio.com.

Larry: How do you view the problem of sleep?

Lauren: Yes. Sleep away the problems. I should say the importance of sleep, in particular, isn't just a natural desire. It's completely essential to a healthy, functioning body. When this doesn't happen appropriately, then the body doesn't function appropriately. The body can't detox optimally and the body can't fight off infections as well as it should. Even the brain's ability to learn new information and have a proper thought process – all that is negatively affected when there are sleep problems.

So I view sleep-related problems as really the foundation to building the body back up and to being in balance. It's more than just wanting a person to feel happy that they actually are getting good sleep. It's more of a real foundation of their health. So it's really, really paramount.

How many hours of sleep are needed really depends on the person. It's kind of a sleep thought. It's when someone knows for sure, "Hey, I only need seven hours of sleep or I really need nine hours." There's an intuition we have about how much sleep we need; it's however much you need to feel refreshed. Now, there can be things happening physiologically, such as your adrenal glands are affected or your neurotransmitters are imbalanced. We can talk about all that later. In general, the amount of sleep you need is the amount of sleep you need. It's different for everybody and it should be really customized for the person.

When we miss a good night's sleep, the next day we usually want sugar. We usually want crap food. We usually don't wake up wanting a nice balanced meal and a

bunch of vegetables. So when you miss a full night's sleep, you're similar to a Type 2 diabetic. Your blood sugar is affected so much you become insulin-resistant for about a day. So the first short-term consequence of poor sleep is imbalances in blood sugar. Over time, it can affect your immune systems where your immunity is lower and you can't fight off infections.

Also, you can't learn new things as well, that's something we all probably have experienced where we don't get enough sleep. The next day we feel just kind of "out of it." That's because your brain needs to rest at night and get the proper brainwaves. When that's not happening, then you really can't take in new information as well the next day.

Beyond those things, the World Health Organization actually looks at shift work and not having enough sleep as a human carcinogen. Sleep protects your body from things such as cancer. So when you don't get enough sleep, your body doesn't get that really great level of melatonin. That is the sleep hormone that's secreted only when you're sleeping in darkness. When that hormone isn't released enough over time, it does increase the risk for things like cancer and other diseases.

Beyond that, fertility is so much affected by proper balancing of hormones, which requires good sleep. The ability to lose weight – we know that people who tend to sleep less have a harder time losing weight and maintaining their body composition. So basically any body system you can think of is affected by sleep.

Larry: What symptoms should one look for?

Lauren: Some people who don't really know they're having improper sleep might actually feel somewhat refreshed in the morning. But maybe they deal with anxiety, they just feel depressed or have difficulty thinking, or are forgetful. So they might have those kinds of symptoms during the day and may not know that's because they're not sleeping deeply enough.

Brain function is huge. We know once you're getting really quality sleep, then you can have that sharp memory again, that sharp thinking. You can get things done and not feel like you're just in a brain fog all the time. We see that a lot of times as well. Also, if you tend to be kind of sleepy all day long, where you just feel like you could take a nap at any point, that could be a sign you're not getting that deep restful sleep at night. So you're kind of running on empty all day long.

Larry: What aggravates the problem?

Lauren: Well, the biggest aggravation for sleep issues is continually being in the sympathetic nervous system. I'm sure most of us are familiar with this. You have the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. The parasympathetic is elevated – that's your "fight or flight" response. That's like you running from a tiger and getting out of the jungle to save yourself. The parasympathetic is the "rest and digest" mode. That is the relaxing, you just chilling out, be able to digest food. That's what we probably think of when we do yoga and soak in that relaxed feeling. But for many of us, because it's 2013 and we're stressed out, we're in the sympathetic mode for the majority of the time. It should be balanced equally between the two.

When you're in a sympathetic nervous mode, then you're going to have a difficult time losing weight. When you're in the sympathetic mode, you're going to have a difficult time sleeping; because when you're in this alert mindset, your body is thinking you're running from a tiger, essentially. It might not be a real tiger but it could be an imaginary tiger. So if you have stress in your life, whether that's real or imagined, you're not going to have an easy time going to sleep.

So I would say what aggravates the problem is, number one, stress. Other than that there are biochemical reasons, as we said earlier, such as parasites, a real big cause of insomnia. Also, there are certain nutrient deficiencies such as magnesium. Magnesium is essential for having restorative sleep. Other nutrients help support your adrenal glands, such as B vitamins and vitamin C. So I would say deficiencies in certain nutrients would be the other one.

Also, there are just lifestyle factors. If you are up at night, and you have lights on all around your house, you're looking at your computer screen, you're looking at your iPhone, checking text messages, looking at Facebook, your body is going to think it is daytime. It's not going to think it's time to actually go to sleep. So you're going to release hormones that are going to respond to that appropriately. So it's not like your body is dumb and it doesn't know what time to go to bed; it actually sees a lot of clues that indicate it's daytime.

So what I recommend for patients is once the sun goes down, start to unwind; dim the lights, turn off the lights above your head and use just nightlights like reading

lamps and everything. Then your body doesn't think there's the sun above its head. Because some patients have been so sensitive, I'll have them use amber glasses to actually block out the light. So I would say light and modern technology also aggravates the problem.

In terms of insomnia, causes vary for each individual. One can be too many stimulants or maybe too much coffee, or too much sugar. It also could be artificial sweeteners, different food dyes and preservatives and things. These can be very stimulating for people and they will have a hard time sleeping at night.

Also, I've actually seen parasite infections in my practice a lot, something that most doctors might not check for. Many kinds of parasites tend to be awake at night. So when you're trying to sleep, they're out having a party. They are keeping your stress hormones elevated so you can't get restful sleep. So whenever there's any sleep issues, I always do a stool test for patients to make sure that those aren't present.

Another cause of insomnia could be stress. You're up at night, you're thinking about all the stuff going on throughout your life and you can't actually go to sleep. Those are probably the main ones. Another cause is when you have elevated cortisol at night. This is when you get an adrenal dysregulation. Normally, you want your cortisol high in the morning so you can wake up. You're refreshed and it should gradually drop throughout the day. It should be low at night so you can go to sleep. When cortisol is low at night – which is how it's supposed to be – melatonin can be elevated. Melatonin is your sleep hormone.



So for many of us, our cortisol is high at night. That's why many of us are night owls and we can get a lot of work done late at night. When that happens, the melatonin can't be high and that leads to insomnia. Those are the main causes of insomnia that I see. Now, in terms of sleep apnea, that can happen for a lot of reasons. It can be an obstructive issue where the nasal passages aren't open properly in the throat and you can't get enough air flowing into the lungs. So it could be an obstructive issue. For people that are overweight, which can be a problem; so losing weight is a great option for them. Other times, too, it can actually be due to allergies. In my practice I've seen a lot of seasonal allergies or just elevated histamine continually reacting to something in your environment. It makes those mucous membranes swollen so you can't get enough oxygen delivered into your lungs. So that's another possibility as well. For some people, sleep apnea is just genetic and they're more prone to having that. So then they can undergo a sleep study and be monitored and diagnosed by a doctor to find out if they have that. It can be treated other ways using conventional treatments such as a CPAP, which is machine with a little mask they can wear at night. They have oxygen delivered and that can be really, really effective for them, too.

Snoring can also be related to sleep apnea. If you have any obstructive issues and can't have smooth delivery of oxygen, then you're going to have some snoring. I've actually seen a lot of times food sensitivities can cause the issues of snoring. So when there's gluten sensitivity or dairy allergies, it causes a lot of inflammation and you mucus buildup, which would result in snoring as well.

Then for some people simply turning and sleeping on their sides can improve the snoring completely. So that's a little tip. You can train your body into sleeping on your side, too.

Larry: How would you treat the problem?

Lauren: To treat insomnia, the very first thing I have patients do is cut out the stimulant. Coffee, even green tea for some people, can be aggravating. So cutting out the stimulants like coffee, any caffeine, sugar, Diet Coke, Coke, anything that's going to rub them up, cut that out, first and foremost. Sometimes, even just that can do the trick for many people. Other than that, work out, get some good exercise. Getting good quality exercise can really help to make those proper releases of hormones during the day so you can have the proper release of hormones at nighttime. So, physical activity such as burst training, interval training, and weightlifting is really effective for that, too. It's about getting your body realigned to the Circadian rhythm – so your body is tuned to light and dark cycles of the day and the night. So when the sun goes up, your cortisol should go up with it. When the sun goes down, your cortisol should drop as well. But for many people, their thoughts know that it is day or night but maybe their bodies don't actually know that.

So when the sun goes up, get some sunshine. Go outside, go for a walk when the sun is going up. When the sun is going down, go for another walk so your body can get in tune to the light and dark cycles of where you live. And again, once the sun goes down, don't be exposed to a lot of different lights in the house because that will affect your hormones as well. So cutting out the stimulants,

getting reacquainted to the light and the dark of where you live – those two are really, really powerful.

Other treatments for insomnia would be addressing the dysregulation of your adrenal glands. So if you have elevated cortisol at night, you can help reduce that using certain natural treatments. I can recommend more specific supplements later but there are ways you can drop the cortisol when it's elevated at nighttime.

So depending on the patient, I can put together an herbal blend of different botanicals that can help increase the GABA in the brain. GABA is the calming neurotransmitter that has you feeling relaxed and chilled out. Increasing GABA at nighttime can help with that as well. Also, as we were talking about earlier, melatonin is your sleep hormone. You can help make more melatonin in your body using natural treatments, too. We will get into that a little bit.

This individual protocol is what the question asked: Is it individualized? What works for me to help sleep may be completely different from someone else. So it really depends on you. Also, from a naturopathic medicine perspective, I very rarely just give treatments. First and foremost, I'm always looking at what's the root cause. So if the reason you can't sleep is because of your lifestyle or diet or maybe certain stimulants, then those are the first things that need to be addressed.

Larry: What dietary recommendations would you make?

Lauren: Dietary recommendations for helping with sleep? Number one, cutting out the sugar, cutting out the caffeine and the stimulants; otherwise, using certain foods that have



high amounts of magnesium can be helpful. So can certain nuts and seeds such as pumpkin seeds and almonds. Even taking a magnesium supplement before bed is really helpful. Having some turkey before bed. I find that for many patients, when they can fall asleep okay, but they can't stay asleep throughout the night, it's actually an imbalance in their blood sugar. What's happening is, during the middle of the night, their blood sugar drops because they don't have proper blood sugar balancing. Then their body releases stress hormones such as adrenaline. That's when their eyes pop open and they're just wide awake in the middle of the night.

Adding in some protein to a snack before bed can help keep blood sugar stable and allow people to stay asleep during the night. It doesn't really matter where the protein comes from. I don't recommend soy in general but turkey, some whey protein, rice protein, hemp protein – whatever works for them that can help keep them asleep. That has worked really well for a lot of patients.

Otherwise, as far as diet, you want to just support your adrenal glands. So the types of nutrients our adrenal glands like include vitamin C. Vitamin C is great to help the adrenal glands stay strong. When you're under a lot of stress, you can wipe out your body's Vitamin C levels. Food sources would be red bell peppers, Brussels sprouts and broccoli. We usually think of oranges, but those foods I mentioned are actually have higher vitamin C than oranges. Strawberries are a nice source as well. Another B vitamin is Vitamin B5, which is called dexpanthenol or pantothenic acid. Vitamin B5 is very supportive for the adrenal glands. It's also often depleted by stress as well. I

recommend getting a supplement or having some foods that are high in vitamin B5. Mushrooms can be a nice source of that such as cremini mushrooms, shiitake mushrooms – those can help support your stress hormone response.

Other than that, other foods increase your serotonin, which is the precursor to melatonin. It helps make that sleep hormone. Foods that increase your serotonin include cashews, bananas, and figs. The supplements I use with my patients include magnesium powder. So taking about 400 mg of powdered magnesium – I like magnesium citrate before bed, it helps to relax the brain and calm down the body. It allows you to get into that relaxed mode to then go to sleep.

Besides magnesium, I also use GABA, which is again the calming neurotransmitter. It help you relax and get in that parasympathetic state by using a little bit of that before bed. There's also 5-HTP, which is a precursor to making serotonin, which then converts into melatonin. So using a little bit before bed, 150mg or so to start, and adjusting it based on what you need, can be really helpful to help you sleep as well. There's herbs that are great such as valerian, a very calming herb and kava kava – you have to be a little careful with kava kava because it can be a little strong some people. Chamomile is great too. Just experiment with it, you can make a little blend. There are nice herbal teas you can get as well from health foods stores that can be quite effective.

In general, I don't recommend just jumping into using melatonin because that can disrupt other hormones if your other hormones are out of balance. So I recommend

trying other treatments first, such as from the lifestyle things I talked about, and maybe some of the other herbs and nutrients. If that's not doing the trick, then you can use melatonin in smaller amounts. Usually, we'll start with one or two milligrams of melatonin then go up to 20 milligrams if that's what's needed. But we really do customize it for the patients.

What to avoid for insomnia? Again, it's going back to just a lot of the lifestyle things – avoiding the stimulants, the caffeine, the sugars, the processed foods. Also cut out the processed grains from your diet and the dairy, and just really stick to healthy proteins and fruits and vegetables. Making sure to drink lots of water and cutting out all the processed junk – because that's really what contributes to a lot of these sleep problems.

Larry: What lifestyle recommendations would you make?

Lauren: Lifestyle recommendations. Number one, cut down on the stress in your life. You have to schedule time to de-stress, because otherwise you will get inundated with things to do and responsibilities in life. So take your walks. In the morning, go for a walk. When the sun goes down, go for a walk. Make that a real priority as that's going to affect everything else in your life, including your sleep: ideally, when the sun is coming up and when the sun is going down.

Also, practice doing deep breathing. When you're still really stressed out, take some nice deep breaths. That instantly puts you into the parasympathetic mode and you're instantly relaxed. That is an easy thing you can do. It doesn't cost any money and it's really simple and



effective. So deep breathing and just being around people who make you happy. If you're in a stressful relationship or you have a job that's stressing you out, you have to balance that out with things that you really like to do; people you really love to be around – things that really charge your battery and fill your tanks.

So those are the kinds of lifestyle things that help make you happy, relaxed, and then have you clear and not stressing when you're trying to go to sleep. Also, lifestyle-wise – what I didn't mention is – you want to have a room that's in complete and total darkness when you're sleeping. Your body is very sensitive to light. It doesn't even matter if you're using a mask over your eyes when you're sleeping because your body and even your skin can sense light. Your skin has light receptors. So you want to have complete and total darkness in your room and cover up night lights; don't let any light come in from outside because that's going to make a big difference. We all know when we go into a hotel and it is a pitch black hotel, we can sleep until noon the next day because we sleep so deeply in that kind of environment. So make your space really sacred where you sleep and have it be as dark as possible because that will make a big difference for you.

Another lifestyle tip I'll share is avoiding alcohol before bed. A lot of ladies, especially those in my practice, rely on wine to go to bed. It can help you relax initially, but then it actually has your blood sugar levels dropping at night. Then you can be wide awake in the middle of the night. So avoid the alcohol. Also avoid smoking because of the nicotine rush. That can prevent you from sleeping



as well. So those are the kinds of stimulants that can disrupt sleep. Exercising in general is a really great idea to have the proper release of hormones and neurotransmitter balancing. It can help with sleep indirectly. You don't want to exercise right before bed. If you think about it, cavemen and ancestors before technology and electricity came around, I highly doubt they were out there on the treadmill in the middle of the jungle getting their calories burned off. When the sun went down, they went to sleep. Your body isn't really accustomed to working out and being in physical or strenuous activities once the sun goes down. So I really recommend transitioning to working out in the morning and shifting away from working out at night. That can also stimulate you and make it difficult getting to sleep.