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Restless Britain: 1 in 10 is taking pills to get some sleep

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One in ten Britons is reliant on medicine to get to sleep, according to research that reveals how the pressure of modern living is affecting our ability to rest properly.

Experts say that a good night's sleep should be seen as important to healthy living as diet and exercise, and warn that the trend towards getting by with fewer hours is a long-term health risk.

One in eight Britons now sleeps for less than six hours a night, according to a survey of 40,000 families sponsored by the Economic and Social Research

Council. Almost 60 per cent take half an hour to get to sleep at least once a week, and one in ten uses sleep medication at least three times a week.

However, a chemical "quick fix" is no substitute for proper rest, according to scientists, who blame social pressure to cram ever more into each day. Professor Sara Arber, of the University of Surrey, who produced the sleep data, said that the problem lay with a culture where "there's almost a macho image around not needing much sleep".

But while high-flyers may, like Margaret Thatcher in her prime, boast of getting by on four hours a night, they are likely to be harming their health. Evidence that sleep deprivation increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease and obesity is "pretty clear cut", according to Professor Francesco Cappuccio, of the University of Warwick.

"If you sleep less than five hours on a regular basis, your long-term [chance] of developing these diseases increases dramatically," he said. The release of hormones controlling appetite and blood pressure was affected by sleep patterns, and "anything you do to work against your body clock will have consequences on your physiology".

Although a small percentage of people will suffer from insomnia, a medical condition, experts believe that most of those relying on sleep medication are turning to drugs to cover social problems.

"A lot of people reach for medication as a quick fix rather than looking at the lifestyle and environmental issues that may be causing their sleep problems," said Neil Stanley, a leading independ-

ent sleep researcher. Yet pills usually failed to solve the problem as they did not provide the most restorative sleep. "There's no medicine that gives a natural sleep," he said. "They give you a drug-induced sleep."

