thermoregulatory, cardiac, pulmonary, renal, immune, gastrointestinal, and neurobehavioral functions. At the molecular level, endogenous circadian rhythmicity is driven by self-sustaining transcriptional/translational feedback loops. In evaluating daily rhythms in humans, it is important to distinguish between diurnal components passively evoked by periodic environmental or behavioral changes (e.g., the increase in blood pressure and heart rate that occurs upon assumption of the upright posture) and circadian rhythms actively driven by an endogenous oscillatory process (e.g., the circadian variations in adrenal cortisol and pineal melatonin secretion that persist across a variety of environmental and behavioral conditions).

While it is now recognized that most cells in the body have circadian clocks that regulate diverse physiologic processes, most of these disparate clocks are unable to maintain the synchronization with each other that is required to produce useful 24-h rhythms aligned with the external light-dark cycle. The neurons in the SCN are interconnected with one another in such a way as to produce a near-24-h synchronous rhythm of neural activity that is then transmitted to the rest of the body. Bilateral destruction of the SCN results in a loss of most endogenous circadian rhythms including wake-sleep behavior and rhythms in endocrine and metabolic systems. The genetically determined period of this endogenous neural oscillator, which averages ~24.15 h in humans, is normally synchronized to the 24-h period of the environmental light-dark cycle through direct input from intrinsically photosensitive ganglion cells in the retina to the SCN. Humans are exquisitely sensitive to the resetting effects of light, particularly the shorter wavelengths (~460–500 nm) of the visible spectrum. Small differences in circadian period contribute to variations in diurnal preference in young adults (with the circadian period shorter in those who typically go to bed and rise earlier compared to those who typically go to bed and wake up later), whereas changes in homeostatic sleep regulation may underlie the age-related tendency toward earlier sleep-wake timing.

The timing and internal architecture of sleep are directly coupled to the output of the endogenous circadian pacemaker. Paradoxically, the endogenous circadian rhythm for wake propensity peaks just before the habitual bedtime, whereas that of sleep propensity peaks near the habitual wake time. These rhythms are thus timed to oppose the rise of sleep tendency throughout the usual waking day and the decline of sleep propensity during the habitual sleep episode, respectively. Misalignment of the endogenous circadian pacemaker with the desired wake-sleep cycle can, therefore, induce insomnia, decreased alertness, and impaired performance evident in night-shift workers and airline travelers.

BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSIOLOGIC CORRELATES OF SLEEP STATES AND STAGES

Polysomnographic staging of sleep correlates with behavioral changes during specific states and stages. During the transitional state (stage N1) between wakefulness and deeper sleep, individuals may respond to faint auditory or visual signals. Formation of short-term memories is inhibited at the onset of NREM stage N1 sleep, which may explain why individuals aroused from that transitional sleep stage frequently lack situational awareness. After sleep deprivation, such transitions may intrude upon behavioral wakefulness notwithstanding attempts to remain continuously awake (see "Shift-Work Disorder," below).

Awakenings from REM sleep are associated with recall of vivid dream imagery over 80% of the time, especially later in the night. Imagery may also be reported after NREM sleep interruptions. Certain disorders may occur during specific sleep stages and are described below under "Parasomnias." These include sleepwalking, night terrors, and enuresis (bed wetting), which occur most commonly in children during deep (N3) NREM sleep, and REM sleep behavior disorder, which occurs mainly among older men who fail to maintain full atonia during REM sleep, and often call out, thrash around, or even act out entire dreams.

All major physiologic systems are influenced by sleep. Blood pressure and heart rate decrease during NREM sleep, particularly during N3 sleep. During REM sleep, bursts of eye movements are associated with large variations in both blood pressure and heart rate mediated by the autonomic nervous system. Cardiac dysrhythmias may occur selectively during REM sleep. Respiratory function also changes. In comparison to relaxed wakefulness, respiratory rate becomes slower but more regular during NREM sleep (especially N3 sleep) and becomes irregular during bursts of eye movements in REM sleep. Decreases in minute ventilation during NREM sleep are out of proportion to the decrease in metabolic rate, resulting in a slightly higher P_{CO_2}.

Endocrine function also varies with sleep. N3 sleep is associated with secretion of growth hormone in men, while sleep in general is associated with augmented secretion of prolactin in both men and women. Sleep has a complex effect on the secretion of luteinizing hormone (LH): during puberty, sleep is associated with increased LH secretion, whereas sleep in the postpubertal female inhibits LH secretion in the early follicular phase of the menstrual cycle. Sleep onset (and probably N3 sleep) is associated with inhibition of thyroid-stimulating hormone and of the adrenocorticotropic hormone–cortisol axis, an effect that is superimposed on the prominent circadian rhythms in the two systems.

The pineal hormone melatonin is secreted predominantly at night in both day- and night-active species, reflecting the direct modulation of pineal activity by a circuitous neural pathway that links the SCN to the sympathetic nervous system, which innervates the pineal gland. Melatonin secretion does not require sleep, but melatonin secretion is inhibited by ambient light, an effect mediated by the neural connection from the retina to the pineal gland via the SCN. Sleep efficiency is highest when the sleep episode coincides with endogenous melatonin secretion. Administration of exogenous melatonin can hasten sleep onset and increase sleep efficiency when administered at a time when endogenous melatonin levels are low, such as in the afternoon or evening or at the desired bedtime in patients with delayed sleep-wake phase disorder, but it does not increase sleep efficiency if administered when endogenous melatonin levels are elevated. This may explain why melatonin is often ineffective in the treatment of patients with primary insomnia.

Sleep is accompanied by alterations of thermoregulatory function. NREM sleep is associated with an increase in the firing of warm-responsive neurons in the preoptic area and a fall in body temperature; conversely, skin warming without increasing core body temperature has been found to increase NREM sleep. REM sleep is associated with reduced thermoregulatory responsiveness.

DISORDERS OF SLEEP AND WAKEFULNESS

APPROACH TO THE PATIENT: Sleep Disorders

Patients may seek help from a physician because of: (1) sleepiness or tiredness during the day; (2) difficulty initiating or maintaining sleep at night (insomnia); or (3) unusual behaviors during sleep itself (parasomnias).

Obtaining a careful history is essential. In particular, the duration, severity, and consistency of the symptoms are important, along with the patient's estimate of the consequences of the sleep disorder on waking function. Information from a bed partner or family member is often helpful because some patients may be unaware of symptoms such as heavy snoring or may underreport symptoms such as falling asleep at work or while driving. Physicians should inquire about when the patient typically goes to bed, when they fall asleep and wake up, whether they awaken during sleep, whether they feel rested in the morning, and whether they nap during the day. Depending on the primary complaint, it may be useful to ask about snoring, witnessed apneas, restless sensations in the legs, movements during sleep, depression, anxiety, and behaviors around the sleep episode. The physical exam may provide evidence of a small airway, large tonsils, or a neurologic or medical disorder that contributes to the main complaint.

It is important to remember that, rarely, seizures may occur exclusively during sleep, mimicking a primary sleep disorder; such sleep-related seizures typically occur during episodes of NREM sleep and may take the form of generalized tonic-clonic movements