

Idiopathic Hypersomnia and the Challenge of Differential Diagnosis in Sleep Medicine

Ebony Jens*

Department of Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

DESCRIPTION

Hypersomnia, often referred to as excessive daytime sleepiness, represents one of the most perplexing and underrecognized disorders within sleep medicine. It is not merely about feeling tired or drowsy; it is a pervasive and often debilitating condition characterized by an overwhelming need for sleep during the day, despite seemingly adequate rest at night. Individuals suffering from hypersomnia frequently struggle to stay awake in situations that demand alertness whether during conversations, meals, work, or even while driving. This chronic inability to maintain wakefulness severely impairs daily functioning, productivity and overall quality of life.

While hypersomnia can appear as a primary disorder, it is often secondary to other medical or psychiatric conditions. For example, sleep-disordered breathing, particularly obstructive sleep apnea, is a major contributor to excessive daytime sleepiness. During apnea episodes, breathing repeatedly stops and starts, fragmenting the natural architecture of sleep and preventing deep, restorative rest. Similarly, psychiatric disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder frequently coexist with hypersomnia. In these cases, the excessive need for sleep may serve as both a symptom and a coping mechanism, as the brain attempts to escape the cognitive overload associated with emotional distress. Certain medications, especially sedatives, antihistamines, and antidepressants, can also induce hypersomnia by suppressing the central nervous system. Additionally, neurological conditions like Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, or traumatic brain injury can damage the brain circuits responsible for wakefulness, further complicating diagnosis and treatment.

The impact of hypersomnia extends far beyond physical exhaustion. The disorder can erode mental health, strain social relationships, and compromise professional performance. Individuals with hypersomnia frequently report difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, irritability, and decreased

motivation all of which mirror symptoms of depression. This overlap often leads to misdiagnosis, with patients being treated for mood disorders when the underlying issue lies in sleep regulation. The psychological burden is immense; many patients feel misunderstood or dismissed, as hypersomnia lacks the visibility of other medical conditions. They may be perceived as lazy or unmotivated, which only deepens their sense of isolation and frustration. In reality, hypersomnia represents a genuine neurobiological dysfunction, one that disrupts the delicate equilibrium between rest and wakefulness that sustains cognitive and emotional health.

Technological and lifestyle factors in modern society have further blurred the boundaries between sleep and wakefulness, exacerbating hypersomnia-like symptoms in the general population. The ubiquity of digital screens, exposure to artificial light at night, and constant stimulation through social media and work-related communication have disrupted natural circadian rhythms. This misalignment between biological clocks and societal schedules termed social jet lag can mimic or worsen hypersomnia by delaying sleep onset and reducing the quality of rest. Moreover, the prevalence of sedentary lifestyles and high-stress environments contributes to mental fatigue and poor sleep quality, creating a cycle where the need for rest is never fully satisfied. These environmental influences make it increasingly difficult to distinguish true pathological hypersomnia from chronic lifestyle-induced sleepiness, underscoring the importance of both clinical evaluation and lifestyle modification in management strategies.

Treatment for hypersomnia depends on identifying and addressing its underlying cause. In cases of idiopathic hypersomnia, where no specific etiology can be found, pharmacological intervention often becomes necessary. Stimulant medications such as modafinil, methylphenidate or amphetamine derivatives are commonly prescribed to enhance wakefulness and improve cognitive performance.

Correspondence to: Ebony Jens, Department of Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, E-mail: jense@gmail.com

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