

## Sleeping pills can lead to premature death

PTI Feb 29, 2012, 05.52AM IST

LONDON: Taking sleeping pills frequently can increase the risk of premature death more than fivefold, a new study has warned.

The study, published in the British Medical Journal Open, found that patients who even take fewer than 18 pills a year are more likely to die early than those not on medication.

The higher the dose, the greater the risk. And those on higher doses also have an increased risk of cancer, said the researchers at the Jackson Hole Centre for Preventive Medicine in Wyoming and the Scripps Clinic Viterbi Family Sleep Centre in California.

The commonly prescribed drugs that may raise such risks included benzodiazepines, newer sedative hypnotics zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon, and barbiturates and antihistamines.

However, experts said worried patients should not stop taking the pills but talk to their doctors first, the Daily Mail reported.

For their study, the US researchers compared over 10,500 patients taking sleeping pills with 23,500 people who were not on the drug. After taking into account pre-existing illnesses of the participants, they found that those prescribed sleeping pills were 4.6 times more likely to die during a two-and-a-half-year period compared to those not on the drugs.

Those taking the lowest doses - four to 18 pills a year - were found to have a 3.6 times higher risk of dying early than non-users, while those taking 18 to 132 pills a year had a 4.4 times higher risk and those on more than 132 pills a year were 5.3 times more likely to die.

Those taking the highest doses each year accounted for 93% of prescriptions in the study and this group was also 35% more likely to develop a major cancer.

The effects were greatest among the age group of 18 to 55 years, although the reasons are not clear, concluding cognitive behaviour therapy may be more successful and "short-term use of hypnotics" should be reconsidered. PTI