

Sleep

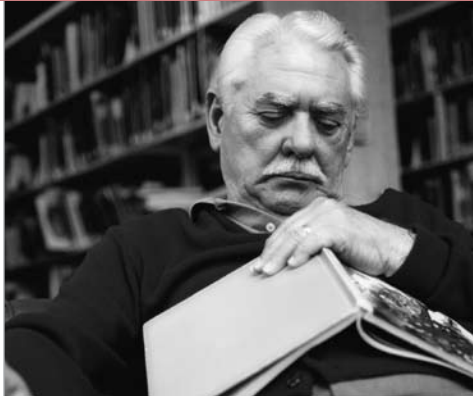
Sleep seems like it should be an easy and effortless activity. . . that is, until you cannot sleep!

Expertise in Matters of the Heart

Difficulty sleeping, or insomnia, is a condition that affects nearly half of all adult Americans. Insomnia is a generic term used to describe any and all sleep loss. It is important to remember that insomnia itself is NOT a sleep disorder, but a symptom of another problem. Generally, insomnia is characterized as restless or interrupted sleep, or the inability to fall asleep and stay asleep to the point where it affects daytime functioning. If you consistently wake up earlier than you intend to or wake up feeling unrefreshed, that too is insomnia.

Over the course of one year, 20-40% of adults will have a few bouts of insomnia. Loss of sleep for one night will not affect us significantly the following day. It will NOT cause an emotional breakdown or significantly impair our ability to function, but it may decrease our motivation and cause sleepiness. However, after several nights of less than optimal sleep, our daily performance is affected by impaired learning and memory, interference with motor skills, reduced immune function and an increase in accidents.

Exercise and good nutrition are important for health, but proper sleep is just as important. Sleep allows the body to rejuvenate and repair itself from daily wear and tear. It reduces stress, increases productivity and improves mental functioning. When we get enough sleep we have the energy to lead active, productive and satisfying lives. As widespread as this problem is, however, sleep researchers estimate that less than five percent of those affected seek treatment. Unless you confide in your physician, he or she is unlikely to consider insomnia or its underlying causes.



Over the past century sleep time has declined 20 percent. In 1910, Americans slept an average of nine hours a night. Now the typical American sleeps approximately seven hours a night. Americans are working longer hours and sleeping fewer. Between the demands (and pleasures) of family, friends, and work, we may not create time which allows us to unwind before bedtime and get a good night's sleep. But choosing time to relax before bedtime and allowing 8 hours 'in' bed is a choice we can make.

Also to blame are technological advances. We live in a society where it is possible to grocery shop in the middle of the night as well as watch movies, play video games, and surf the internet all night long. There are more shift workers and more things we are able to do after the sun sets than there was a century ago. We reach for over the counter medicines and supplements or even prescription medications for occasional sleeplessness, but these will help us only on a temporary basis and can actually make sleeplessness worse. A pill will not cure insomnia. But determining the underlying cause can.

Sleep is essential to our physical and emotional well-being, so to properly treat insomnia we must understand the causes.

Transient insomnia is the most common form of insomnia. It is caused by a specific, but short-lived, event. It can be caused by either good or bad stress such as a job interview or exciting news, jet lag, shift work, sleeping in a new place, illness, anxiety, etc. Normally, it will last for a day or two, or up to a week. Once the underlying problem is solved, the insomnia will usually go away. However, after experiencing a few sleepless nights, some people learn to associate bedtime with anxiety and then sleeplessness becomes 'learned insomnia'. Although the stress that caused the insomnia in the first place may have diminished, the habit persists. But in time, with the underlying problem having been solved, the insomnia will go away.

Short-term insomnia is defined as two to three weeks of poor sleep because of ongoing stress at work or home such as marital difficulties, having an infant or young child and sleeping with 'one ear open,' illness or death in the family, etc. Again, once the underlying cause is resolved, you will most likely revert to your normal sleeping pattern.

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Chronic insomnia is poor sleep every night, most nights, or several nights a month. It may last for months or even years. There are many possible causes. It is often the result of many factors—biological, physical or psychological. Depression, chronic anxiety, sleep apnea, arthritis, and restless leg syndrome are only a few examples. To treat this type of insomnia, you must first see a physician to diagnose any existing medical problems.

Strategies to improve sleep

- 1. Minimize or eliminate caffeine:** People who experience sleep difficulties should avoid caffeine as much as possible. Those who can't or do not want to give up caffeine should avoid ingesting it for at least six hours before bedtime.
- 2. Eliminate smoking or chewing tobacco:** Nicotine stimulates brain activity that can cause difficulty with sleeping. People who kick the habit fall asleep more quickly and wake less often during the night. Those who continue to use tobacco should avoid smoking or chewing for one to two hours before bed.
- 3. Alcohol:** While alcohol may help some people fall asleep, they will wake up a few hours later and have difficulty getting back to sleep. Alcohol is blamed for 10% of chronic insomnia. Alcohol interferes with the body's ability to experience normal stages of sleep.
- 4. Activity:** Exercise is the number one physician recommended choice for improving sleep. Aerobic exercise (such as walking, jogging, biking, swimming etc.) *5-6 hours prior to bedtime* will decrease the amount of time it takes to fall asleep, reduce nighttime awakenings and increase the amount of deep sleep a

person gets. In fact, exercise is the only known way for healthy adults to boost the amount of deep sleep they get. It is especially helpful if the underlying cause of insomnia is anxiety, stress or tension. But strenuous exercise too close to bedtime can keep a person awake, therefore it is best to exercise before 4pm.

- 5. Keep the bedroom environment comfortable:** A quiet, cool, bedroom with minimal distractions is critical. Keep the television, computer, phone etc. in other rooms. We respond to environmental cues. So, removing clutter associated with daytime responsibilities reinforces that the bedroom is for sleep or sex only. Keeping discussions of stressful situations out of the bedroom is helpful too.
- 6. Relaxation:** For most people with insomnia, the activity portion of life is being overly emphasized at the expense of rest and relaxation. Soothing music, aromatherapy, a warm bath, yoga, meditation and light reading are all activities which can bring on relaxation and decrease one's stress level. Develop a 30-60 minute bedtime routine. Avoid exciting, dynamic or focused activities in the evening after 9pm. Having a healthy balance between activity and relaxation is important.
- 7. Turn the clock away!** If you are not constantly checking the clock to determine how much sleep you're missing, you may actually fall asleep faster. Develop a 'I don't mind' attitude if you are unable to sleep when you feel you should be asleep.

- 8. Live life with a present moment focus!** Train yourself through self-talk not to worry about the future. Instead of thinking negative things to yourself such as: "This is horrible! I can't sleep and I will never be able to get through tomorrow because I will be so tired," take a deep breath and tell yourself: "So, I'm having some trouble sleeping tonight. . . getting upset and tense will not get me to sleep any faster. I might as well relax. My body is getting 90% of the rest it requires just by laying down and relaxing. I will do okay tomorrow." If you find yourself tossing and turning in bed for 30 minutes or more, you should get up and do some light reading or a light task until you feel sleepy again and return to bed.
- 9. Eat a late tryptophan snack:** A bedtime snack such as a glass of warm milk, cookie, banana, turkey or similar food high in L-tryptophan may help promote sleep in some people. (Tryptophan should not be used in pill or supplement form as it has been reported to be associated with a serious condition called eosinophilia.)
- 10. Regular sleep time:** Establishing a regular sleep/wake schedule is very important, especially a regular time of arising in the morning, with no more than +/- 1 hour deviation from day to day. This helps to synchronize one's sleep rhythms and patterns.

If your daytime functioning has been compromised by sleep deprivation for a month or more, do NOT hesitate to ask your doctor for help. Remember, finding a remedy requires uncovering the cause.



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