

Insomnia



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Insomnia is the inability to fall asleep or stay asleep. It can also be an issue of waking unrefreshed or experiencing excessive daytime fatigue.

Insomnia affects people of all ages and may impact them in different ways. For some, it's an inability to get to sleep. Others wake too early or are unable to stay asleep through the night. Almost 60 million Americans suffer from insomnia each year. In young people, stress and worry create insomnia (although work, family issues, illness or pain can impact sleep at any age). Older adults are less likely to produce adequate amounts of different hormones, which affects sleep quality. Sleep disorders



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become more common in women as they become post menopausal with less rapid eye movement (REM) sleep occurring in addition to having issues with both falling asleep and staying asleep. After age 55, the National Sleep Foundation reports that two out of three adults have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at least a few nights a week.

According to the National Institutes of Health, 30 to 40 percent of adults report some symptoms of insomnia, which are chronic for 10 to 15 percent. For some, insomnia is not directly associated with any other health issues. For others, insomnia is a symptom of another health issue (e.g. sleep apnea) or of medications used to treat a health condition (e.g. statin drugs for high cholesterol). In most cases, insomnia can be managed once the root cause is identified.

For most, insomnia is the result of poor lifestyle choices. Loud noise levels, bright lights and excessive temperatures at bedtime, poor diet and exercise choices all effect sleep patterns. Excessive caffeine consumption can also be an issue.

Insomnia may have physical, emotional and hereditary components. Up to one-third of people with insomnia have a family history of insomnia.

Sleep is critical. Immune function, judgment, memory and patience may be impaired or actual physical illness may arise when a person is deprived of quality sleep over long periods of time. How much sleep is necessary? Different sources suggest anywhere from six to eight hours a night. For teens, like toddlers, ten to twelve hours a night are necessary.

While many will head for prescription medications first, this should actually be the last treatment attempted. The British Medical Journal recently suggested that prescription medications for insomnia resulted in patients who were more than twice as likely to experience an adverse event as they were to gain a better quality of sleep from such medications and that the risk of side effects outweighed any benefits of improved sleep quality. (BMJ November 11: Epub. <http://www.bmj.com>)

The easiest place to begin when trying to treat insomnia is with good sleep hygiene habits. The first place to start is the bedroom. Is it quiet? There shouldn't be a television in the bedroom and for a good 30 minutes prior to lights out there should be no screen time (TV or computer). Unlimited TV, computer and Internet use make people more likely to sleep less and feel more tired. TV and computers may aggravate sleep issues, especially in children because deep sleep in childhood is required to release growth hormone and improve learning. Excessive time in front of the TV and computer screens in teen years has been reported to affect adult sleep behavior. Bedtime should

be the same time nightly. A new pillow or mattress may make sleeping more comfortable. Most will sleep better in a cooler room. Listening to relaxing music 30 minutes before bed may also help promote better sleep.

While exercise helps with sleep, exercising within three hours of bedtime can make it more difficult to fall asleep. Avoid daytime naps, no matter how tired you are, as they can disrupt your ability to get quality sleep at night. Large meals late in the day, caffeine, alcohol and tobacco products should also be avoided although a light snack of turkey, some walnuts, a glass of milk or yogurt, all of which are rich in the amino acid tryptophan, may help. The scents of vanilla, green apple and lavender may be beneficial. If you have diabetes or are hypoglycemic, regulating your blood sugar may help.

Over the counter remedies include chamomile tea, valerian, hops, L-theanine, lemon balm, passion flower herbs, calcium/magnesium, vitamin B, melatonin hormone supplementation or 5-HTP, a serotonin precursor. Simple blood tests can identify if hormones such as melatonin, serotonin, growth hormone, estrogen or progesterone levels are too low, if cortisol (a stress hormone) is too high or if B vitamin levels are too low.

If all these options have been explored to no avail, traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture and chiropractic should be considered as effective treatments that don't have the unwanted side effects of prescription medications.

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