



Insomnia

What is insomnia? Insomnia means having difficulty sleeping—either falling asleep or staying asleep. Almost everyone has insomnia from time to time. But if you often have problems sleeping, or if your sleep problems make it difficult for you to get through the day or enjoy life because of feeling tired all the time, you should talk to your doctor about it—and find out what can be done about it.

Symptoms of Insomnia

- Daytime sleepiness or tiredness
- Being forgetful
- Having trouble concentrating
- Feeling irritable or anxious
- Feeling sad or depressed
- Having low energy
- Not being interested in many activities
- Always worrying about not being able to sleep

What Causes Insomnia?

The kind of insomnia that most people experience from time to time may be caused by stress, excitement, or from changing bedtime habits. It may be caused by your sleep situation, such as being too warm or too cold, or being in a room with too much light or noise.

Sometimes insomnia continues and it seems clear that it is caused by big life changes, such as experiencing the death of a loved one or going through a divorce.

Insomnia that continues for a long time also may be caused by an illness—a chronic physical or mental illness—or a symptom like pain, or a side-effect from some medicines.

What Are Some Of The Illnesses That Can Cause Insomnia?

Psychiatric and psychological problems are a common cause of insomnia. Difficulty falling asleep or staying

asleep may happen with depression or anxiety disorders like panic disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Chronic medical illnesses can also cause insomnia. Diseases of the brain like Alzheimer’s disease are a common cause, as are disorders of the lungs or heart that affect breathing. Any illness that is accompanied by pain, such as different types of arthritis or neuropathy, can also cause problems sleeping. Finally, there are a number of diseases, called sleep disorders, which always produce sleep problems, such as restless legs syndrome and sleep apnea syndrome.

What May Help?

Develop healthy sleeping habits:

- Get regular exercise, if you are able, but don’t exercise just before bedtime.
- Avoid naps during the day.
- Plan to go to sleep and get up at the same time each day.
- Create a bedtime ritual, or practice relaxing activities, before bedtime.
- Try eating a light snack before bedtime such as crackers and milk.
- Keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet.
- Go to bed only when you feel sleepy.
- Don’t lie in bed doing activities that could be done elsewhere, like watching TV or reading; make your bed a place for only sleep and sex.
- If you are not asleep in 20 minutes, leave the bedroom and return to bed when you’re sleepy.

Things to avoid in the evening:

- Eating heavy meals or drinking alcohol close to bedtime
- Caffeine-containing beverages, including coffee, soft drinks, tea, and chocolate
- Any drug or medicine that can stimulate you
- Tobacco use

Exercises to quiet your mind:

Some people find it hard “to turn off their mind” at bedtime. Thoughts and worries often come at night when it’s quiet, preventing sleep. If this happens, tell yourself that you can think about these things tomorrow. Then set your thoughts aside. You may have to try this several times before your mind quiets down. Sleep comes easier when your mind is quiet.

Sometimes setting up a special time during the day or early in the evening to think about and try to solve problems may be helpful in falling asleep at bedtime.

Should I see my doctor and get treatment?

If you follow healthy sleep habits and you’re still unable to sleep, be sure to tell your doctor about your problem. He or she can help figure out what’s causing the problem and the best way to treat it. It could mean finding and treating an underlying illness, or changing a medicine you are taking.

The good news is there is help for insomnia. Here are some things your doctor may discuss:

- **Referral to a professional**

Sometimes your doctor will refer you to a sleep specialist who can give you tests for things like sleep apnea and restless leg syndrome, if they are suspected as the cause. A sleep specialist may ask you to keep a special sleep diary.

Your doctor may be able to refer you to a mental health professional for specific treatments. These may include:

- **Relaxation exercises:** Muscle relaxation, biofeedback, and breathing exercises are ways to reduce anxiety at bedtime.
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy:** This type of therapy helps you control or eliminate negative thoughts and worries that keep you awake. This is a first choice for treating insomnia and has been found to be more effective than medication.

- **Prescribe medication**

You doctor also may prescribe medication to help you get to sleep. Both sedative drugs and antidepressant drugs are used for insomnia. Doctors generally don’t recommend relying on prescription sleeping pills for more than a few weeks, but several medications are approved for long-term use.

Patient Education Series

Insomnia

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.