

Sleep Problems (Insomnia)

Many people have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. Some get to sleep easily but sleep lightly, waking often during the night. Insomnia is the term used to describe when your lack of sleep at night affects your ability to perform activities the next day.

Insomnia affects people of all ages but is more common in adults and the elderly. More than 45% of all New Zealanders report insomnia at least once a week.

People are said to have chronic insomnia if they have poor sleep on at least one night a week for at least three months.



Why is sleep important?

Sleep is a vital part of our well being and studies have shown that being deprived of sleep can adversely affect our health.

A good night's sleep can boost our immune system, decrease stress, enhance concentration, and improve our mood. Chronic poor sleep is associated with dementia, depression, heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and several other medical conditions.

One night's sleep is actually made up of several sleep cycles; each lasting around 90 to 120 minutes. During each sleep cycle, we enter different stages of sleep, termed REM (rapid-eye-movement) and non-REM sleep. We all briefly wake up between cycles, although most of us won't remember waking by the morning.

How much sleep do I need?

The amount of sleep you need each night depends on your age and ranges from 14–17 hours for newborns to 7–8 hours for older adults. For most adults aged less than 65 years, 7–9 hours sleep each night is recommended.

Of course, some people function on less sleep, while others need more.

To ensure you are getting the right amount of sleep for you, ask yourself the following questions: do you feel sluggish or irritable the next day and find it hard to concentrate on work or other tasks? Are you overweight? Do you feel sleepy whilst driving? Do you depend on caffeine to get you through the day?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions it is a good idea to look at how much sleep you really are getting and what you can do to improve your sleep.

Causes of insomnia

- Drinking alcohol or caffeine (coffee)
- Food (eating heavy or spicy meals close to bedtime)
- Medical conditions (eg, anxiety, arthritis, asthma, depression, reflux, restless legs)
- Medicines (eg, for heart or thyroid disease, colds/flu)
- Menopause/perimenopause
- Napping during the day
- Pain or sickness
- Shift work or travel through time zones
- Sleep apnea or snoring
- Smoking or nicotine replacement therapy
- Stress, trauma, or recent bereavement

Improving your sleep

There are many things you can do to improve your sleep. First, talk to your GP about your insomnia and try to identify a cause. Sometimes eliminating or even just knowing the cause can help.

It is especially important to talk to your GP if you are feeling excessively sleepy during the day or falling asleep at inappropriate times (such as while driving) as this can indicate a specific sort of sleep problem (such as obstructive sleep apnoea or narcolepsy) which needs treatment (as well as daytime sleepiness being a safety concern).

Your GP will talk to you about your lifestyle and any causes of stress. In a few situations, you may be referred on to a sleep clinic for investigation.

The most effective long-term treatments for insomnia involve changing your sleep habits and behaviours.

Sleep hygiene/good sleep habits

Sleep hygiene is the rituals and behaviors you follow before you go to bed and while you are in bed. They are also called sleep habits. Many sleeping problems are due to bad habits built up over a lifetime.

Everybody, regardless of the cause of their insomnia, should try to improve their sleep hygiene/sleep habits.

Tips for improving sleep habits

- Get at least 30 minutes of natural light outdoors first thing in the morning
- Exercise daily for at least 30–60 minutes
- Reduce or avoid caffeine (eg, coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks), cigarettes and alcohol, during the day but especially at night
- Avoid large meals late in the evening
- Avoid TV, computer screens, mobile phones for an hour or two before bed – the artificial light interferes with your natural cues to sleep – and keep them out of the bedroom (use the bed for sleep only)!
- Create your own bedtime ‘ritual’ eg, unwind before bed by reading or listening to music, write down the things to do tomorrow, make a hot, milky drink or take a warm bath – begin at the same time each night
- Make sure your bedroom is cool, dimly lit or dark, quiet and as comfortable for sleep as possible. Make sure your feet are at a good temperature – not too cold and not too hot. Turn around any bedroom clocks
- Go to bed only when you are drowsy and do not nap for longer than 20 minutes during the day

Some techniques to help you sleep

Progressive relaxation: Involves slowly tensing and relaxing all the muscles in your body starting from your toes and working upwards towards your face. Hold each tension for about five seconds then relax for 10 seconds.

Visualisation: Close your eyes and imagine a place that makes you feel calm and happy; it may be a mountain stream, the beach on a summer’s day, or a grassy meadow. Concentrate on how relaxed this place makes you feel.

Focus on your breathing: Place the tip of your tongue just behind your front teeth and keep it there. Exhale completely through your mouth with a whooshing sound. Close your mouth and inhale through your nose for four seconds. Hold your breath for seven seconds. Exhale completely through your mouth for a count of eight seconds. Repeat up to four times.

Medications for chronic insomnia

Sleeping pills

Sleeping pills can help, but they should only be used for short periods (eg, five to 10 days, ideally not daily), or on an occasional basis. They do not address the underlying causes of insomnia.

Sleeping pills do carry some risks. Some people can become dependent on medication to help them sleep. If taken for longer periods, the medication may not work unless a larger dose is taken. Some people can also get ‘rebound insomnia’ when coming off sleeping pills. Combining sleeping pills with alcohol or some other medicines can be dangerous.

Sleeping pills also have some side effects: confusion, sedation, amnesia and impaired coordination. These do not occur in everyone but they can lead to falls or being unsafe while driving or performing other tasks, especially if their effects are still felt in the morning.

If you are taking sleeping pills it is important to take them as prescribed by your GP and not to combine sleeping pills or increase the dose unless you have spoken to your GP.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a natural hormone that helps regulate your body clock – it provides a cue for feeling sleepy. The natural production of melatonin in the body varies over 24 hours and is suppressed by daylight. Melatonin production declines with age.

Prolonged-release melatonin tablets are a prescription treatment for insomnia disorder in people who meet certain criteria and are aged over 18. Melatonin may cause drowsiness but is not thought to cause dependency, tolerance (where an increased dose is required for the same effect), or have any serious adverse effects. It should not be taken with alcohol or other sleeping pills.

Additional information

The National Sleep Foundation

www.sleepfoundation.org

Original material provided by The Health Media

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