

Insomnia

Insomnia

At times, you've probably had trouble falling asleep. Maybe you couldn't stop thinking about something. You tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. Or maybe you fell asleep but woke up during the night, unable to fall back to sleep. In the morning, you were tired.

This pattern of being unable to get a good night's sleep is called insomnia. It affects your energy, mood and ability to work. It can make you tense or anxious.

Your age, the time you go to bed, when you exercise and if you have other sleep problems may add to your insomnia.

Adults need about 8 hours of sleep each night. Older adults need less.

Insomnia happens to everyone once in a while. It is constant (or chronic) if it occurs most nights for at least 1 month.

Who is at Risk for Insomnia

You may be at higher risk if you:

- are older (especially older than age 60)
- have gone through menopause
- have a history of depression or anxiety
- are under significant stress
- have other medical problems.

Symptoms of Insomnia

Symptoms of insomnia include:

- problems falling asleep
- waking up during the night without going to back to sleep
- waking up too early in the morning
- feeling unrefreshed in the morning.

Causes of Insomnia

Insomnia has many causes. You may:

- have poor sleep habits
- be troubled by a personal or work problem
- be under significant stress
- be depressed
- have an illness or disease
- have a schedule change
- be taking medicines that affect sleep
- be drinking or eating more caffeine or alcohol.

How to Find Out if You Have Insomnia

Your health care provider can tell if you have insomnia by taking your medical and sleep histories. You may be asked to keep a sleep diary or talk with your partner about your night's sleep.

If your health care provider thinks you may have another type of sleep disorder such as sleep apnea, you may need to take other tests.

(over)

How to Treat Insomnia

It is important to treat any medical problems (anxiety, depression) that may be causing the insomnia.

Insomnia is not a disease. It can often be treated with lifestyle or bedtime changes. (See the next section.) Other treatments include medicine and behavior therapy.

■ Over-the-counter medicine

Talk to your health care provider or pharmacist before you take sleep aids. Pills work for a short time. Taking them a long time can make insomnia worse. You may even need to take higher doses for the pills to work.

Sleeping pills have side effects such as daytime sleepiness and should not be taken with alcohol or other medicines that have sedating effects.

You should avoid over-the-counter sleep aids if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or if you have certain medical problems (glaucoma, breathing problems).

■ Prescription medicine

Talk to your health care provider to see if prescription medicine is right for you. These medicines are known as hypnotics.

Hypnotics have side effects (risk of sleepwalking, increased risk for falls, daytime sleepiness) and should not be taken with alcohol.

Medicine should only be taken for a short time. Ask your health care provider about medicine risks and how to manage insomnia without it.

■ Behavior therapy

While it may take time to change thinking and habits when it comes to sleep, it may be the best way to treat insomnia.

Working with a health care provider trained in behavioral treatment of insomnia can help in getting a better night's sleep.

Good Sleep Hygiene

Good sleep hygiene promotes healthy sleep and daytime alertness and can help prevent sleep problems. Here are some tips for getting better sleep:

- Get regular exercise, but not right before bed.
- Find a good temperature for sleeping (a cool bedroom is best).
- Go to bed only when you are tired. If you can't fall asleep right away, leave the room and find something quiet to do such as reading. When you are tired, go back to bed.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even on weekends or during vacation.
- Avoid taking naps during the day. If you do nap, limit the time to less than 1 hour. Do not nap after 3 p.m.
- Avoid eating a heavy meal or spicy foods before bedtime. If you are hungry at bedtime, eat a light snack such as cheese and crackers.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine.
- Avoid nicotine before bed.
- Use your bed only for sleep and sex. Let your body "know" that the bed is for sleeping.
- Avoid watching the clock.
- Don't take your worries to bed.
- Make sure your mattress and pillow(s) are comfortable.
- If you are currently taking medicines (over-the-counter or prescription), ask your health care provider if they are keeping you awake at night.

Talk your health care provider if you have questions or concerns.