

INSOMNIA

Insomnia is defined as difficulty falling asleep and/or difficulty remaining asleep. The many causes of insomnia include anxiety, depression, alcoholism or other substance use/abuse, side effects of medications, and even long-term use of sleeping pills. Frequent or long-term insomnia can lead to excessive daytime drowsiness, difficulty concentrating, mood swings, and diminished quality of life, and reduced personal health.

Most people will experience difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep at times. Concerns about major life events or an unfortunate personal circumstance may cause anyone to toss and turn while trying to fall asleep, or to wake up early and not be able to get back to sleep. This is a normal reaction to such occasions. However, some people frequently experience this type of troubled sleep, or insomnia.

Causes

The most common cause of insomnia is a change in everyday routine or environment, or anticipation of a major event. Examples include starting a new job, traveling, moving into a new home, or getting married. Insomnia due to changing life circumstances or major events usually last for only a few days. This transient insomnia is normal and should not be a cause for concern. Extended periods of anxiety or stress may cause insomnia that lasts a week or two. This short-term insomnia should disappear when the anxiety or stress is resolved.

When insomnia lasts for more than a few weeks, it could be a symptom of a more serious health problem. Chronic insomnia, which lasts three weeks or longer, may be the result of an illness that causes pain, nausea, shortness of breath, skin irritation, or other condition that disturbs sleep.

Treatment

Because insomnia is a symptom, not a disorder, effective treatment should focus on the cause of sleeplessness. Transient and short-term insomnia, related to changes in routine or environment, important life events, or concerns about personal issues, should disappear on its own. Treatment of chronic insomnia begins with identifying and treating the cause, such as depression or pain. Even when the exact cause of insomnia cannot be identified, treatment options are available. These include improving your sleep habits (good sleep hygiene) or using medications prescribed by your healthcare provider.

Good Habits for a Good Night's Sleep

- Go to bed at the same time each night.
- Wake up at the same time each day, no matter how poorly you've slept the night before.
- Get regular exercise each day. Exercise releases energy and mental tensions and is an effective sleep aid. However, avoid strenuous exercise within four hours of bedtime.
- Keep the temperature in your bedroom comfortable.
- Keep the bedroom quiet when sleeping. Soundproof with heavy curtains or use ear plugs to reduce noise.
- Keep the bedroom dark. Use dark blinds or wear an eye mask, if needed.
- Use your bed only for sleep and sex.
- Take medications only as directed.

Don't

- Exercise just before going to bed
- Engage in stimulating activity or conversation just before bed (playing a competitive game or discussing the family finances with your spouse)
- Drink caffeine. Remember caffeine is found in chocolate, regular coffee, tea and sodas.
- Read or watch television in bed
- Use alcohol to help you sleep
- Lie in bed awake for more than half an hour. Instead, get up, do some quiet activity, then return to bed when you are sleepy. Do this as many times during the night as you need.

- Eat a heavy meal just before going to bed.

These things may make your insomnia worse.

Contact your physician if you have any questions or problems.