

Sleep and Insomnia

Sleep needs are different from person to person. Some people may get by on 4 to 5 hours. Others feel good after 8 to 9 hours. Each person's sleep needs are also somewhat different from day-to-day.

Almost everyone has problems sleeping at some point in their life. It is helpful to know what leads to insomnia and what keeps it going.

Things that make it more likely to have insomnia

- Poor sleep habits
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Aging

Things that can cause insomnia

- Work problems
- Family conflict
- Changes in daily or weekly activities
- Medical problems
- Personal loss (like death or divorce)
- Pain
- Stressful events

Things that keep insomnia going

- Daytime napping
- Too much time in bed
- Some medications
- Sleeping pills
- Worrying a lot about falling asleep
- Drinking alcohol
- Irregular sleep and wake times

Insomnia can lead to

- Anxiety (feeling very worried and stressed)
- Family issues
- Loss of motivation
- Depression
- Work problems

Staying in bed when you are not sleeping can actually make insomnia worse.

When you stay in bed awake for too long, your brain starts to connect your bed with frustration and being awake rather than with sleep.

The harder you try to sleep, the less likely you are to succeed.

Changes in behavior can help lessen insomnia. See the sleep guidelines below for more information.

Sleep and Insomnia

Sleep Guidelines for Good Sleep Habits

No Caffeine 6 to 8 Hours Before Bedtime

- Caffeine disturbs sleep. Even for people who do not think caffeine has a big effect on them. People with insomnia are often more sensitive to mild stimulants like caffeine than normal sleepers.
- Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, soda, chocolate, and many over-the-counter medications (such as Excedrin).

Do Not Use Nicotine and Alcohol

- It is not true that smoking helps you relax. Nicotine (found in cigarettes and other tobacco products) is a stimulant. As nicotine builds up in your body, it has the same effect as caffeine.
- Alcohol may make you fall asleep. But alcohol makes your sleep restless, less deep, and more broken up, so you end up feeling more tired.

No Sleeping Pills

- Sleep medications only work for a short period of time. If you take them regularly, they no longer work after about 2 to 4 weeks
- Over time, sleeping pills make sleep problems worse. When you use sleeping pills for a long time, withdrawal from the pills can lead to insomnia. After long-term use, many people wrongly think they need sleeping pills to sleep normally.

Lessen Naps

- Naps during the day take away from your sleep at night. This causes more restless sleep, difficulty falling asleep, or waking up early. If you must nap, keep it short (15 to 30 minutes) and try to plan it before 3pm.
- Find something active to do instead of taking a nap. Examples include taking a walk, calling someone, drawing, or doing a puzzle. Physical activities are better than mental or passive ones during which you might fall asleep.

Regular Exercise

- About 40 minutes of exercise each day in the late afternoon or early evening can help sleep. The positive effect often takes several weeks to be seen.
- Do not exercise within 2 hours of bedtime. This may make your nervous system more active and prevent you from falling asleep.

Sleep and Insomnia

Sleep Guidelines for Good Sleep Habits

Eating Habits

- At bedtime, do not eat anything with caffeine (like chocolate) or anything that can cause gas (like nuts, beans, or raw fruits and vegetables). Do not eat high-fat foods like potato chips or corn chips.
- Do not have heavy meals and spices in the evening.
- Do not go to bed too hungry or too full. A light bedtime snack is okay such as a glass of warm milk, cheese, or a bowl of cereal.

Comfortable Bedroom

- Make your bedroom quiet, dark, and comfortable.
- Noises can be masked with white noise (like the noise of a fan) or with earplugs. Darken bedrooms with black-out shades or wear sleep masks.
- Keep the room at a comfortable temperature. Make sure your mattress and pillow are not too soft or too firm for you.

Have a Regular Bedtime Plan to Unwind

- Give yourself at least an hour before bedtime to wind down. The brain is not a light switch that you can quickly turn on and off.
- Take a hot bath, read a book, watch some TV, or have a nice talk with your spouse or kids. Find what works for you and make it your plan before bed.
- Do not argue or struggle with a problem before bed. Stay off your phone or computer.

Regular Sleep and Wake Times

- Set your alarm clock and get out of bed at the same time each morning, including weekdays and weekends. Do this no matter when you went to bed or how much sleep you got the night before. Keeping the same wake-up time helps regulate your internal biological clock and reset your sleep-wake rhythm.
- You may want to plan things for the morning to help you stick to your wake-up time. For example, sign up for an early morning exercise class, schedule a walk or breakfast with a friend, or plan to get coffee with a coworker.

Use Your Bedroom Only for Sleep and Sex

- Just as your brain connects the kitchen with food and eating, this guideline will help you think of your bedroom as a place for sleep and pleasure.
- Follow this rule in the day and at night. Do not watch TV, eat or read in bed.

Sleep and Insomnia

Sleep Guidelines for Good Sleep Habits

Only Go to Bed When You Are Sleepy

- When you go to bed too early, it only gives you more time to become stressed or frustrated. People often lie in bed thinking about the events of the day, planning the next day, or worrying about whether they can fall asleep. These behaviors keep insomnia going.
- Delay going to bed until you are sleepy. You may need to go to bed later than your planned bedtime. Stick to your same wake up time no matter what time you go to bed.

Get Out of Bed When You Cannot Fall Asleep

- If you cannot fall asleep or if you wake up during your sleep and cannot get back to sleep for 15 minutes, get out of bed. Do a non-stimulating activity such as reading.
- Go back to bed only when you are sleepy. Signs of sleepiness include yawning, head bobbing, eyes closing, and lack of concentration. The longer you stay up and the more sleepy you are, the quicker you will fall asleep.

Behavior Change for Better Sleep

Studies show that getting better sleep improves mental health. It lessens depression, anxiety (feeling worried) and stress.

Following the guidelines will take patience and effort. For the first few nights, you may have to get up many times before falling asleep. You may be sleepy the next day.

You may think of reasons why you cannot follow the guidelines. **Stay motivated.** Remind yourself this is the path to a future of better sleep.

By following the guidelines, you will slowly have long-term improved sleep. It often takes 2 to 3 months for a sleep problem to get totally better. But most people see improvements in 2 to 3 weeks if they regularly follow the guidelines.

Get support from loved ones. Explain these guidelines to the people you live with and why they are important to you. Ask for support and help from family and friends because changing behaviors can be hard.

Sleep and Insomnia

Therapy for Insomnia

For people with moderate or severe insomnia, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) is recommended. CBT-I helps patients understand and change thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that add to insomnia.

Studies show that CBT-I works. It results in less time to fall asleep, more time spent asleep, and less waking up during sleep.

Recommended Reading

- The Sleep Solution by Chris Winter
- Hello Sleep by Jade Wu
- Why We Sleep by Matthew Walker
- Say Good Night to Insomnia by Gregg Jacobs
- Quiet Your Mind and Get to Sleep: Solutions to Insomnia for Those with Depression, Anxiety, or Chronic Pain by Colleen Carney and Rachel Manber
- The Sleep Fix: Practical, Proven, and Surprising Solutions for Insomnia, Snoring, Shift Work, and More by Diane Macedo

Other Resources

- VA Path to Better Sleep: <https://www.veterantraining.va.gov/sleep/index.asp>
- CBT-I Coach: <https://mobile.va.gov/app/cbt-i-coach>
- Dr. Lullaby: <https://www.drlullaby.com/>
- Sleepio: <https://www.sleepio.com/>
- Better Sleep: <https://www.bettersleep.com/>
- **Project Sleep Helpline:** 1 (800) 819-2043, Monday to Friday 8am to 3pm