

[Return to Web version](#)

## Insomnia: How to Get a Good Night's Sleep

### What is insomnia?

Insomnia is a sleep disorder. People who have insomnia may not be able to fall asleep. They may wake up during the night and not be able to fall back asleep, or they may wake up too early in the morning. Many people have insomnia.

[Return to top](#)

### What causes insomnia?

Insomnia is your body's way of saying that something isn't right. Things that may cause insomnia include stress, too much caffeine, depression, changes in work shifts, and pain from medical problems, such as arthritis.

[Return to top](#)

### Is insomnia a serious problem?

Getting enough sleep is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Insomnia can affect you mentally and physically. It can make you feel tired, depressed and irritable. It can also make it hard for you to concentrate or perform tasks during the day. If you don't get enough sleep on a regular basis, you're at increased risk of diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

[Return to top](#)

### How much sleep do I need?

Most adults need about 7 to 8 hours of sleep each night. You know you're getting enough sleep if you don't feel sleepy during the day. The amount of sleep you need stays about the same throughout adulthood. However, sleep patterns may change as you age. For example, older people may sleep less at night and take naps during the day.

[Return to top](#)

### What can my doctor do to find out why I'm not sleeping?

Your family doctor may ask you some questions about your sleep habits (such as when you go to bed and when you get up), what medicines you take, and your intake of caffeine and alcohol. Your doctor may also ask if you smoke.

Your doctor may ask how long you've been having insomnia and if you have any pain (such as from arthritis). If you have a bed partner, your doctor may ask him or her if you snore while you sleep. Your

doctor may also ask about events or problems in your life that may be upsetting you and making it hard for you to sleep.

[Return to top](#)

## **What is a sleep diary?**

If the cause of your insomnia is not clear, your doctor may suggest that you fill out a sleep diary. The diary will help you keep track of when you go to bed, how long you are in bed before falling asleep, how often you wake up during the night, when you get up in the morning and how well you sleep. A sleep diary may help you and your doctor identify patterns and conditions that are affecting your sleep.

[Return to top](#)

## **How is insomnia treated?**

In many cases, once the underlying problem that's causing insomnia is taken care of, the insomnia goes away. The key is to find out what's causing the insomnia so that the problem can be dealt with directly. Many people can sleep better simply by making a few changes in their sleep habits.

If your insomnia continues even after you deal with underlying problems and improve your sleep habits, your doctor may suggest trying behavioral therapy. This type of therapy helps you change behaviors that make your insomnia worse and teaches you new behaviors that help you sleep better.

[Return to top](#)

## **What can I do to improve my sleep habits?**

The following are some things you can do to help you sleep better:

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends, even if you didn't get enough sleep. This will help train your body to sleep at night.
- Develop a bedtime routine. Do the same thing every night before going to sleep. For example, take a warm bath and then read for 10 minutes every night before going to bed. Soon you'll connect these activities with sleeping, and doing them will help make you sleepy.
- Use the bedroom only for sleeping or having sex. Don't eat, talk on the phone or watch TV while you're in bed.
- Make sure your bedroom is quiet and dark. If noise is a problem, use a fan to mask the noise or use ear plugs. If you must sleep during the day, hang dark blinds over the windows or wear an eye mask.
- If you're still awake after trying to fall asleep for 30 minutes, get up and go to another room. Sit quietly for about 20 minutes before going back to bed. Do this as many times as you need to until you can fall asleep.

[Return to top](#)

## **Will an over-the-counter sleep aid or a supplement help?**

Although you don't need a doctor's prescription to get an over-the-counter (OTC) sleep aid, it's a good idea to check with your doctor before you try one, especially if you take any other medicines. OTC sleep aids are not meant to be used for a long period of time. Be sure to follow the directions on the label carefully. Don't drink alcohol while you are taking an OTC sleep aid.

Certain supplements (for example, [melatonin](#) and valerian) are advertised as treatments for insomnia. However, there is little scientific evidence about how well these products work or what the long-term effects of using them are. Talk to your doctor before you try one of these products.

[Return to top](#)

## Will prescription sleeping pills help?

Prescription sleeping pills are not a cure for insomnia. Although they can help in some cases, they're only a temporary form of relief. Most types of sleeping pills should only be used for a limited time. Regular use may lead to rebound insomnia. This happens when a person quits taking sleeping pills and his or her insomnia comes back even worse than before.

Sleeping pills can be unsafe to use if you have certain health problems. Ask your doctor if sleeping pills would be helpful for you.

[Return to top](#)

## Tips to help you sleep

- Avoid or limit your use of caffeine (coffee, tea, caffeinated soda, chocolate), decongestants, alcohol and tobacco.
- Exercise regularly, but don't exercise within a few hours before going to bed.
- Find ways to reduce or manage the stress in your life.
- Don't lie in bed worrying about things. Set aside another time just for worrying. For example, spend 30 minutes after dinner writing down what's worrying you and what you can do about it.
- Try eating a light snack before going to bed, but don't eat too much right before bedtime. A glass of warm milk or some cheese and crackers may be all you need.
- Don't nap during the day if naps seem to make your insomnia worse.

[Return to top](#)

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