

INSOMNIA

Insomnia is not a disease, but is a subjective complaint of difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep, or just not seeming to get enough good sleep. Insomnia has many causes. If you suffer from insomnia, you are not alone. It is believed that serious insomnia affects up to one-fifth of the American population.

As we age, sleep becomes lighter and more easily disrupted. It is not uncommon for a 60-year-old person to awaken 6 to 10 times per night. In fact, by the time we are 60 years old we may have lost most, if not all of our deep sleep. Deep sleep is believed to be important for restoring our body reserves such as energy, muscle, bones and even our immune system used for fighting infections.

Sleeping pills typically increase our light sleep, but do nothing for restoring the essential deep sleep we so often lack. Furthermore, sleeping pills do not treat the cause for having insomnia. Sleeping pills may also be addictive, especially when used for long periods of time without education and guidelines for establishing good sleep habits. These are just a few of the many reasons sleeping pills should be used cautiously for the treatment of insomnia.

Realize, probably the most important aspect of managing insomnia is identifying the cause. Some of the more common causes are as follows:

1. **Medical Illnesses:** Several medical conditions can result in sleeping difficulties. A few of these conditions are as follows:

Asthma
Dementia
Emphysema

Gastric Reflux
Heart failure
Kidney failure

Mitral valve prolapse
Parkinson's disease
Thyroid disease

2. **Chronic Pain Syndrome:** Pain, related to problems such as arthritis, back pain, headaches, and injuries, are a common cause of insomnia.
3. **Medications:** Physician prescribed and over the counter medications are common causes of sleep problems. Following are just a few:

Antidepressants
Asthma medications
Emphysema medications

Decongestants
Diet pills
Blood pressure medications

Steroids
Thyroid medications

4. **Psychiatric Problems:** It is especially important to realize that although depression and anxiety are common causes of severe insomnia, it can also be the cause of these psychological problems.
5. **Caffeine Products:** Food and drinks that contain caffeine include coffee, tea, soda products such as Coke and Pepsi, and chocolates.

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6. **Irregular Sleep Patterns:** Waking up and going to sleep at varying times, as well as taking long naps can cause insomnia. Sleep difficulties are very common for people who work night shifts or changing shifts, and for people who frequently travel across time zones.
7. **Alcohol:** Although alcohol helps some people fall asleep; it typically results in awakenings with unrefreshed sleep. Alcohol also significantly disrupts your sleep quality.
8. **Nicotine:** The nicotine in cigarettes and chewing tobacco may result in insomnia.
9. **Exercise Too Close to Bedtime:** Vigorous exercise before bedtime may result in difficulty falling asleep.
10. **Uncomfortable or Noisy Bedroom:** Disturbances such as a snoring or restless bed partner, noises from air-conditioning and heating systems, clocks, children, traffic, trains, television and radio, or too much light, and uncomfortable room temperatures can disrupt your sleep.
11. **Social/Psychological Stresses:** Work related stresses, financial problems, marital discord, children, and the many other stresses we experience on a daily basis could be major factors relating to short or long-term sleep problems.
12. **Eating before bedtime:** Eating heavy meals close to bedtime, in addition to causing heartburn and weight gain, may result in difficulty falling asleep.
13. **Periodic Limb Movements:** Rhythmic repetitive kicking of your legs, ankles or arms may cause recurrent awakenings after falling asleep.
14. **Restless Leg Syndrome:** A strange, often uncomfortable sensation of your legs or arms can cause great difficulty falling asleep.
15. **Sleep - Apnea/Snoring:** Heavy snoring and grunting, choking or cessation of breathing while asleep can be a very serious cause of insomnia.

Insomnia can cause problems related to handling difficult situations, completing tasks, memory impairment, mood swings and marital discord. When associated with daytime sleepiness, persons with insomnia may have an increased risk of motor vehicle accidents. People sleeping less than 6 hours per night versus 7 to 8 hours per night have a higher death rate. Insomnia needs to be taken seriously.

If you suffer from insomnia that does not resolve by following sleep hygiene guidelines or correcting some of the above-mentioned causes, consider addressing your problem with a physician experienced in sleep disorder medicine. This is especially important if you are currently using medications to help you sleep. Relief from insomnia is best accomplished by identifying and treating the cause.