

# Treating Insomnia

## What is insomnia?

**Insomnia** [in-SAHM-nee-uh] is when you have problems with falling asleep, staying asleep with difficulty getting back to sleep, or waking too early and then having problems functioning during the day.

## What causes it?

Insomnia can be caused by:

- Stressful life events and situations.
- Irregular work schedules (shift work, rotating shifts).
- Medical or mental health problems. Common medical problems that cause insomnia:
  - Emotional and mood disorders, such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD
  - Neurological (nerve or brain) disorders, such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease
  - Chronic pain
  - Sleep-related breathing disorders, such as obstructive sleep apnea (OSA)
  - Frequent urination (peeing) during the night
  - Hormonal problems, such as an overactive thyroid
  - Digestive problems
  - Menopause or hot flashes
  - Side effects from taking certain medications

Often, the steps you take to manage the problems caused by your sleeplessness are what cause chronic (long term) insomnia. Some of those things include:

- Staying in bed when you can't sleep
- Worrying about sleep
- Not keeping a regular sleep routine



## Things you can do now to improve your sleep

Here are some simple steps you can take to help improve your sleep:

- 1** Go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- 2** Exercise regularly.
- 3** Create relaxing, positive routines in the last hour before bed. Some examples are:
  - Reading
  - Taking a warm bath
  - Listening to calm music
- 4** Use your bed for sleep and sex only.
- 5** Keep the bedroom dark, cool, and quiet at bedtime.
- 6** Use headphones, an eye mask, or white noise to block distractions.
- 7** Avoid the following:
  - Stimulants, such as caffeine and tobacco
  - Alcohol or other sedatives
  - Heavy meals within 2 to 3 hours before bed
  - Electronic stimulation from laptops, computers, phones, tablets, and TV within 1 to 2 hours before going to bed

## What are the symptoms and problems associated with insomnia?

Symptoms of insomnia include:

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Waking several times during the night with difficulty getting back to sleep
- Waking too early and not getting back to sleep

These problems often lead to:

- Feeling tired during the day
- Memory problems
- Trouble focusing on work or other daily activities
- Irritability or changes in mood

## How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask about your medical history, including any injuries, medicines you take, and other new or chronic (ongoing) health problems you have. They will also ask about your daily habits, diet, and sources of stress in your life. Any of these could make it hard to sleep well.

Your doctor may also ask that you have an overnight sleep study at a clinic or at home. This will help show whether your insomnia is related to another sleep disorder. They may also ask you to keep a 2-week sleep diary. A sleep diary can help your doctor understand your sleep patterns, which can help guide your treatment plan.

You can download and print a sleep diary from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine at this link:

[uclahealth.org/sleepcenter/workfiles/forms/sleep-diary.pdf](https://uclahealth.org/sleepcenter/workfiles/forms/sleep-diary.pdf)

## How is insomnia treated?

There are several ways to treat insomnia. The 2 main treatments include making changes in your daily habits (see tips on [page 1](#)), and **cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia**, or **CBT-I**.

CBT-I is an active treatment that requires some work on your part. It typically involves meeting 2 to 8 times with a trained CBT-I provider. Each visit lasts 20 to 50 minutes. Most people who try CBT-I have better sleep. Studies show that it is the most effective treatment over the long term. CBT-I will help you learn about:

- How sleep works.
- Strategies to improve the quality of your sleep (see tips on [page 1](#)).
- Keeping a sleep diary.
- Behaviors that may be making sleep worse.
- Relaxation strategies to quiet your mind and relax your body.
- How beliefs about sleep may add to worry about sleep and worsen your insomnia

Your doctor may also recommend either prescription or over-the-counter sleep aid medications for **short-term** use.

Talk with your doctor to determine a treatment plan that's right for you. Over time, **making these changes can increase the quality and amount of sleep you get and help you feel more rested.**



