

Insomnia

Insomnia, the most common sleep disorder, occurs when people have trouble falling or staying asleep. It is not defined by a specific number of hours of sleep a person gets or how long it takes to fall asleep; individuals vary in their need for, and their satisfaction with, sleep. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble getting a good night's sleep. Together you can identify possible reasons for your sleeping difficulty and try appropriate measures to correct the problem.

Types of Insomnia

Insomnia can be classified as transient (short term), intermittent (on and off) and chronic (constant). Insomnia that lasts from a single night to a few weeks is referred to as transient. Episodes of transient insomnia which occur from time to time are said to be intermittent. Insomnia is considered to be chronic if it occurs almost nightly and lasts a month or more.

Causes of Insomnia

There are many causes of insomnia. The condition generally occurs in people who are experiencing one or more of the following:

- Stress
- Environmental noise
- Extreme temperatures
- A change in their surrounding environment
- Sleep/wake schedule problems such as those due to jet lag
- Medication side effects

Certain factors seem to make individuals more likely to experience insomnia. These include:

- Advanced age (insomnia occurs more frequently in those over age 60)
- Female gender
- A history of depression

The following behaviors have been shown to perpetuate insomnia in some people:

- Expecting to have difficulty sleeping and worrying about it
- Ingesting excessive amounts of caffeine
- Drinking alcohol before bedtime
- Smoking cigarettes before bedtime
- Excessive napping in the afternoon or evening

Chronic insomnia is more complex and often results from a combination of factors, including underlying physical or mental disorders. One of the most common causes of chronic insomnia is depression. Other underlying causes include arthritis, kidney disease, heart failure, asthma, sleep apnea, narcolepsy, restless legs syndrome, Parkinson's disease and hyperthyroidism.

Frequency of Occurrence

Insomnia is found in men and women of all age groups, although it seems to be more common in females (especially after menopause) and in the elderly. The ability to sleep, rather than the need for sleep, appears to decrease with advancing age.

Symptoms and Signs

Symptoms of insomnia include the following:

- Having difficulty falling asleep
- Waking up frequently during the night and having difficulty returning to sleep
- Waking up too early in the morning
- Experiencing unsatisfying and non-refreshing sleep

In addition, insomnia may cause problems during the day including tiredness, a lack of energy, difficulty concentrating and irritability.

Diagnosing the Condition

Insomnia can be diagnosed by collecting a medical history and sleep history from a patient. The sleep history may be obtained from a sleep diary filled out by the patient, or by an interview with the patient or the patient's partner concerning the quantity and quality of their sleep. Specialized sleep studies may be recommended, but only if there is suspicion that the patient may have a primary sleep disorder such as sleep apnea or narcolepsy.

Treatment

Transient and intermittent insomnia may not require treatment since episodes last only a few days at a time. For example, if insomnia is due to a temporary change in the sleep/wake schedule, as with jet lag, a person's biological clock will often return to normal on its own. However, for some people who experience daytime sleepiness and impaired performance as a result of transient insomnia, the use of short-acting sleeping pills may improve sleep and next-day alertness. As with all drugs, there are potential side effects. Over-the-counter sleep medications are not usually recommended for the treatment of insomnia.

Treatment for chronic insomnia consists of:

- Diagnosing and treating underlying medical or psychological problems
- Identifying behaviors that may worsen insomnia and stopping (or reducing) them
- Possibly using sleeping pills, although the long-term use of sleeping pills for chronic insomnia is controversial. A patient taking any sleeping pill should be under the supervision of a physician to

closely evaluate effectiveness and minimize side effects. In general, these drugs are prescribed at the lowest dose and for the shortest duration needed to relieve the sleep-related symptoms. For some medicines the dose must be gradually lowered as the medicine is discontinued because, if stopped abruptly, it can cause insomnia to occur again.

In addition, behavioral techniques to improve sleep are often employed. These techniques include:

- **Relaxation therapy.** There are specific and effective techniques that can reduce or eliminate anxiety and body tension. As a result, the person's mind is able to stop "racing," the muscles can relax and restful sleep can occur. It usually takes practice to learn these techniques and to achieve effective relaxation.
- **Sleep restriction.** Some people suffering from insomnia spend too much time in bed unsuccessfully trying to sleep. They may benefit from a sleep restriction program that at first allows only a few hours of sleep during the night. Gradually the time is increased until a more normal night's sleep is achieved.
- **Reconditioning.** Another treatment that may help some people with insomnia is to recondition them to associate the bed and bedtime with sleep. For most people, this means not using their beds for any activities other than sleep and sex. As part of the reconditioning process, the person is usually advised to go to bed only when sleepy. If unable to fall asleep, the person is told to get up, stay up until sleepy and then return to bed. Throughout this process, the person should avoid naps and wake up and go to bed at the same time each day. Eventually the person's body will be conditioned to associate the bed and bedtime with sleep.

Resources

Content on this page was adapted from documents found on the website for the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), one of the National Institutes of Health. The website is located at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov>.

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