



Insomnia

Sleeplessness is a common problem. It may occur temporarily, particularly during times of stress, or it may be more chronic.

Insomnia can be described as difficulty getting to sleep, difficulty staying asleep and sleep that is not restorative, which leaves you feeling tired the next day.

Sleep apnoea

This is not insomnia, but is a sleeping disorder that, if untreated, may cause further medical problems. The symptoms include snoring, periods when breathing stops, followed by physical restlessness.

Many things may affect sleep patterns:

- Age - we need less sleep as we grow older.
- Exercise - increases the need for sleep.
- Emotional factors - life's stresses, grief, anxiety and depression may affect sleep.
- Stimulants - caffeine (coffee, tea, cola drinks), nicotine and other stimulants may increase sleeping problems.
- Pain and physical discomfort.
- Medications - certain medications increase insomnia, such as steroids, thyroxine, some antidepressants, some antihypertensives, and some cold/flu and asthma medications.
- Menopause.
- Times of rapid growth in children (the hormone that helps a child grow is a steroid).

Keep a diary

If you are having sleep problems, try recording your sleeping patterns: what time you go to bed, when you wake, if you sleep during the day, if you feel refreshed, if fatigue is affecting your daytime activities.

It can help you work out when and how much sleep you need. You can also bring it along to your GP if you need further help.

Some advice to help improve your sleeping patterns:

- Avoid stimulants like caffeine or nicotine, particularly later in the evening.
- Exercise regularly.
- Make sure your bed is comfortable and keep noise or bright light to a minimum.
- Try to avoid using sedatives like alcohol or benzodiazepines. Our bodies grow accustomed to sedatives. Benzodiazepines are physically addictive and after a period are no longer effective.
- Use your bed only for sleep or sex.
- Do not eat, read or watch TV in bed unless you are sure these help you go to sleep.
- Go to bed only when you are sleepy.
- Use relaxation techniques such as relaxing music.
- Try not to worry about going to sleep or about the day's activities. Using a notebook to write down the things you feel you need to worry about tomorrow is sometimes useful.
- Try to establish a pattern by going to bed and getting up at the same time each day.

- If you find you are lying awake in bed for longer than 15 minutes, get up and do something different until you feel sleepy.
- If you wake in the night and cannot get back to sleep within 15 minutes, get up and do something else until you feel sleepy.
- Try to avoid daytime naps, but if you do sleep in the day accept that you may not need to sleep as long at night.

These ideas may help you establish a more comfortable sleep pattern.

Remember, worrying about not sleeping is more exhausting than just being awake. Worrying in itself can prevent you sleeping.

If you follow the advice in this leaflet, but continue to have sleeping problems, consult your GP.

