

Insomnia

Sleep is as essential to our well-being as food, air and water. Most healthy adults need an average of six and a half to nine hours sleep per night. Quality of sleep has been shown to be more important than quantity. Many people will at some point in their lives have difficulty either falling or staying asleep, and it is an especially common problem amongst young people. Although it is not in itself life threatening, it can be very de-stabilising, distressing and ultimately frustrating.

Sleep problems can include:-

- Difficulty falling asleep (longer than 30-40 minutes)
- Feeling restless and unable to settle at night
- Trouble staying asleep, waking often, lying awake in the middle of the night
- Waking up early and being unable to go back to sleep
- Frequent headaches
- Not feeling refreshed after sleep
- Only sleeping with the aid of alcohol, sleeping tablets, prescription or recreational drugs

The effects of not getting enough of the right sort of sleep can be quite wide reaching. Symptoms may include:

- Falling asleep during the day
- Constantly feeling tired
- Inability to concentrate
- Difficulty learning and retaining information
- Struggling to make decisions and having a decreased sense of judgement
- Being irritable and frustrated
- Struggling to express yourself
- Increased threat of injury and accidents

Insomnia is a condition that is caused by other circumstances and does not just occur out of the blue. Sometimes it is difficult to recognise what the reason may be, but the list below offers some common causes:

- State of mind – anxiety, depression, worry, anger, grief, anticipation of an upcoming event

- Transition - the big changes that have happened in your life recently, moving house/city, leaving home, starting university.
- Environment – is the room different from your usual sleeping habitat? Is it lighter, darker, noisier, quieter, hotter, cooler? Is the bed comfortable?
- Pain – one of the commonest causes of temporary insomnia
- Medical conditions such as anorexia, a heart condition, breathing problems, digestive issues, high blood pressure, narcolepsy, sleep apnoea, diabetes, asthma and arthritis.
- Recreational drugs such as nicotine, caffeine, heroine, cocaine, amphetamines, LSD, and cannabis
- Overuse of sleeping pills and tranquillisers can actually cause disturbances in sleep patterns

The good news is that insomnia is nearly always treatable, and the best cure can be carried out by you! It may help you to talk to someone about any concerns you may have such as your GP, or a counsellor, but often, making a few minor adjustments can improve the quality of your sleep as long as you are prepared to stick to them.

Helping Yourself – Your Environment

There are certain environmental situations that seem fixed and unchangeable that may be preventing a good night's sleep. The bedroom may be cold, the neighbours noisy, and the bed may be uncomfortable. However, there are still certain things you can do to improve your chances of getting a restful night.

If the bed is sagging and/or too soft, put a board under the mattress. Ensure that the bedding is clean, and move the bed away from any external wall (if you are too cold) or closer to the window (if you are too hot).

- If the room is too light, swap the curtains for heavier ones, or even put a blanket up at the window as a temporary measure. You could also use a sleep mask or scarf to cover your eyes. If the room is too dark, open the curtain, and/or use a night light.
- Noise is a common sleep disrupter. Use earplugs if there is no other way to reduce the noise. It might

also be useful to attempt to change your attitude to the noise. People are actually capable of sleeping through quite high noise levels. It is usually the feelings about the noise that prevents restful sleep rather than the actual noise itself.

- Try to use relaxation exercises to calm yourself down, and take your mind off it. Politely asking noisy neighbours to tone things down is another possibility, as well as turning on some music to mask the outside sounds. If you are in University halls, and feel that the disturbances are becoming unreasonable please speak with the University authorities such as the student welfare advice team.

Helping Yourself – Lifestyle

- Exercise regularly
- Stay up until a reasonable time, even if you feel tired earlier in the day
- Only go to bed when you are feeling really sleepy
- If you have been in bed for more than half an hour, unable to fall asleep, get up and do something else until you are feeling tired again.
- Establish a routine, which may include setting an alarm for the morning, that gives you 7-9 hours sleep per night
- Get up at the same time each day
- Relax mentally and physically for an hour before bedtime
- Have a warm bath, take a light stroll, or do some yoga before going to bed.
- Make a list of the things on your mind – and then forget about them – put them to bed too!
- Use your imagination to distract you from thinking about the fact that you can't get to sleep. Imagine a journey to your favourite location, or tell yourself the story of your favourite novel from beginning to end. Think about your favourite room, and give yourself a guided tour.
- Often insomnia can breed insomnia, in that anxiety may increase at the thought of the lack of sleep, and the effect that will have on your day ahead.
- Try to remember that when you are lying down the body is resting even if you are not sleeping.

Things to Avoid

- Taking stimulants to keep you awake, or sedatives including alcohol to help you to sleep
- Sleeping during the day, no matter how tired you are
- Going to bed when you are stressed, wound up or just not ready
- Using your bed for work, watching TV, eating, speaking on the phone
- Eating, drinking or smoking if you awaken during the night
- Falling asleep in front of the TV
- Drinking too much close to bedtime

Only some of these may apply. Use those which seem to fit with your circumstances, and see the effect they have. If things don't change, try out some of the other ideas. Your aim is to break the cycle of the insomnia.

If you have been experiencing insomnia for a long time you may be suffering from depression. Symptoms can include:-

- Waking up in the middle of the night, unable to return to sleep
- Loss of interest, energy and appetite
- Aggressive and anti-social behaviour
- Aches and pains that seem to have no physical explanation

If you think that you may be depressed, please contact one of the members of our support team within the university and/or contact one of the counsellors in the University Counselling Service.

Please see website for up-to-date service details and contact numbers: <http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

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