

Excellence in rural healthcare

# Sleep

Occupational Therapy

[www.ulh.nhs.uk](http://www.ulh.nhs.uk)

## Insomnia

Insomnia is the inability to get the amount of sleep you need to wake up feeling rested and refreshed. It is defined not by the number of hours you sleep for, but how you feel after sleeping and the quality of your sleep. It is the most common sleep complaint but it is more accurate to think of it as a symptom of other problems.

Symptoms:

- Difficulty falling asleep despite being tired
- Waking up frequently during the night
- Trouble getting back to sleep when awakened
- Exhausting sleep
- Relying on sleeping pills or alcohol to fall asleep
- Difficulty concentrating during the day
- Daytime drowsiness, fatigue or irritability
- Waking up too early in the morning

### **Common causes of insomnia:**

Sometimes it can last a few days and goes away on its own, especially when tied to a temporary cause such as stress. Other times it is persistent and is usually tied to an underlying mental or physical issue.

**Psychological causes of insomnia:** depression, anxiety, chronic stress, post traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder. Sleep deprivation can make the symptoms of these worse and treating the underlying issues is key to curing insomnia.

**Medications that can cause insomnia:** antidepressants, cold and flu medication that contains alcohol, pain relievers that contain caffeine, diuretics, corticosteroids, thyroid hormone and high blood pressure medications.

**Medical conditions that cause insomnia:** asthma, allergies, Parkinson's Disease, hyperthyroidism, acid reflux, kidney disease, cancer, chronic pain.

**Sleep disorders that can cause insomnia:** sleep apnoea, narcolepsy, restless legs syndrome.

## Why is sleep important?

### **Sleep boosts your immunity**

Prolonged lack of sleep can disrupt your immune system, so you're less able to fend off bugs.

### **Weight gain**

Sleep-deprived people have reduced leptin levels (the chemical that makes you feel full) and increased levels of ghrelin (the hunger-stimulating hormone). Studies show if you sleep less than 7 hours a day you tend to gain more weight.

### **Sleep boosts mental well-being**

A single sleepless night can make you moody and irritable, so it's unsurprising that chronic sleep deprivation can lead to mood disorders such as anxiety and depression.

### **Sleep prevents diabetes**

Studies have suggested that people who usually sleep less than five hours a night have an increased risk of having or developing diabetes. Missed deep sleep may lead to type 2 diabetes by changing the way the body processes glucose.

### **Sleep wards off heart disease**

Long-standing sleep deprivation seems to be associated with increased heart rate, an increased blood pressure and higher levels of certain chemicals linked with inflammation. These put additional strain on your heart.

### **Sleep increases sex drive**

Men and women who don't get enough quality sleep have lower libidos and less of an interest in sex.

## **Good sleep hygiene**

### **Keep regular sleep hours**

Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time everyday will programme your body to sleep better. Choose a time when you're likely to feel tired and sleepy. Avoid napping and if you feel like you have to nap, limit it to 30 minutes before 3pm.

### **Create a restful sleeping environment**

Your bedroom should be a peaceful place for rest, sex and sleep. It should be dark, quiet, tidy and a comfortable temperature. Use thick blinds or curtains or wear an eye mask. Use earplugs if noise is a problem. Try to avoid watching television, listening to the radio or eating in your bedroom.

### **Make sure your bed is comfortable**

It is difficult to get to sleep on a bed that is too hard or too soft, too small or too old. Select a mattress, sheets and pillows that are comfortable. Your mattress should be firm enough to support your spine in the correct position, but also conform to your body.

### **Exercise regularly**

Exercise can create a better quality of sleep and reduce the body's temperature. Take regular exercise in the day, moderate exercises such as swimming and walking can help relieve tension built up during the day.

### **Cut down on caffeine**

Decrease the amount of caffeine products (tea, coffee, cocoa, chocolate, soft drinks etc) which you consume. Particularly after midday **and try to avoid all caffeine 4 hours before bedtime because caffeine is a stimulant.** You could switch to an alternative such as decaffeinated coffee or tea or a warm, milky drink.

### **Don't over-indulge**

Don't eat or drink large quantities before bed. Avoid alcohol around bedtime, although it can promote sleep at first, it can disrupt it later on in the night.

### **Avoid stimulating activity and stressful situations before bed**

Avoid vigorous exercise, big discussions or arguments, TV, computer or video games. Don't use backlit devices shortly before going to bed.

### **Don't smoke**

Don't smoke cigarettes before bedtime or during the night. Nicotine is a stimulant and smokers take longer to sleep and wake more frequently.

### **Try to relax before you go to bed**

Aim to wind down an hour before you go to bed. Have a warm bath, listen to quiet music or do some gentle yoga to relax the mind and body.

### **Write down your worries**

If you tend to lie in bed worrying about tomorrow, set aside time before you go to bed to make plans for the next day to avoid doing these things when you're in bed trying to sleep. Worrying floods your body with adrenaline and before you know it you're wide awake.

### **If you can't sleep get up**

If you can't sleep, don't lay in bed worrying about it, get up and do something you find relaxing until you feel sleepy again and then go back to bed.

### **Avoid watching the clock**

Avoid watching the clock as this will only make you anxious about how long it has taken you to get to sleep.

### **Avoid regularly using over the counter sleeping tablets**

It is unclear about the effectiveness of these and they don't tackle the underlying problem. They also have side effects.

### **Spend time during the day in daylight**

Your brain produces the hormone melatonin to help regulate your sleep-wake cycle. As melatonin is controlled by light exposure, not enough natural light during the day can make your brain feel sleepy, while too much artificial light at night can suppress production and make it harder to sleep.

### **Avoid stress and worry**

When you are anxious your heart rate increases and in turn your mind starts to 'race'. One way to manage this and slow your heart rate is to place your hand on your heart and quiet yourself so that you can hear the beating. Then breathe in deeply and slowly for three or four seconds, then breathe out for three or four seconds. Repeat this until you feel your heart rate slowing. This will then slow the busy brain activity.

Another technique to stop worrying thoughts that cause your heart to race in the first place is to think positive thoughts. Speaking overrides thinking and will stop the negative thoughts. To explain this, start saying the alphabet inside your head, when you get to "J" start saying the letters out loud.

You should stop thinking it in your head, because the speaking overrode your thoughts. You can do this when worrying about something before you sleep.

## **Relaxation**

Making time for activities which make you relax is important in helping you to sleep.

- Talk to others about anything which might be worrying you.
- Find the relaxation tools which work for you.
- Try finding enjoyable activities which take your mind off worrying thoughts.

Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, yoga and tai chi can help quiet your mind and relieve tension. They can also help you fall asleep faster and get back to sleep quickly should you wake during the night.

## Breathing exercises

**This calming breathing technique for anxiety and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere.**

You will get the most benefit if you do it regularly, as part of your daily routine.

You can do it standing up, sitting in a chair that supports your back, or lying on a bed.

Make yourself as comfortable as you can. If you can, loosen any clothes that restrict your breathing.

If you're sitting or standing, place both feet flat on the ground. Whatever position you're in, place your feet roughly hip-width apart.

- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five. You may not be able to reach five at first.
- Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from one to five again, if you find this helpful.
- Keep doing this for three to five minutes.

## Deep muscle relaxation

Deep muscle relaxation takes about 10 to 15 minutes. For people with insomnia it is recommended that this be completed just before going to bed or after you get in bed but it can be practiced at any time of the day. As with any new technique it may take time to master, but with regular practice it should become easier.

During progressive muscle relaxation, you will focus on each muscle group in your body, first tensing selected muscles for a few seconds and then slowly relaxing them over the course of 20 to 30 seconds. It is recommended you lie down in a quiet space, free of distractions and breathe steadily as you progress in the following order:

- **Face.** Lift your eyebrows to wrinkle your forehead and then slowly relax and let the tension out of your forehead. Close your eyes tightly and then relax and slowly open them. Tense your lips, cheeks and jaw muscles by grimacing and then feel a sense of serenity come over your face as you relax all your facial muscles at once.
- **Shoulders and arms.** Bring your shoulders towards your ears, tensing your muscles and then slowly let them relax. Starting with your upper arms, flex your biceps and then relax, letting the tension out of your muscles. Tense your forearms and then slowly let them relax.
- **Chest and abdomen.** Take a deep breath and tense the muscles within your chest and abdomen and then slowly exhale as you relax these muscles.
- **Back.** Flex the muscles in your back as you arch them on the floor or bed and then relax and let the stress and tension go out of your back muscles.
- **Hips and buttocks.** Tighten the muscles in your hips and buttocks and then slowly release the tension and feel the stress leaving this area of your body.
- **Legs and feet.** Flex your leg muscles, squeezing your legs together and then slowly relax. Flex your feet for a few seconds and then relax them. Curl your toes and then slowly let them return to neutral.

After you have systematically tightened and relaxed all the muscle groups in your body, you should feel relaxed and calm.

## **What is mindfulness?**

Professor Mark Williams, former director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, says that mindfulness means knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment.

## **How to be more mindful**

Reminding yourself to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the world around you is the first step to mindfulness.

## **Notice the everyday**

"Even as we go about our daily lives, we can notice the sensations of things, the food we eat, the air moving past the body as we walk," says Professor Williams. "All this may sound very small, but it has huge power to interrupt the 'autopilot' mode we often engage day to day and to give us new perspectives on life".

## **Keep it regular**

It can be helpful to pick a regular time – the morning journey to work or a walk at lunchtime – during which you decide to be aware of the sensations created by the world around you.

## **Try something new**

Trying new things, such as sitting in a different seat in meetings or going somewhere new for lunch, can also help you notice the world in a new way.

## **Watch your thoughts**

"Some people find it very difficult to practice mindfulness. As soon as they stop what they're doing, lots of thoughts and worries crowd in," says Professor Williams.

"It might be useful to remember that mindfulness isn't about making these thoughts go away, but rather about seeing them as mental events".

"Imagine standing at a bus station and seeing 'thought buses' coming and going without having to get on them and be taken away. This can be very hard at first, but with gentle persistence it is possible".

"Some people find that it is easier to cope with an over-busy mind if they are doing gentle yoga or walking".

## **Name thoughts and feelings**

To develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings, some people find it helpful to silently name them: "Here's the thought that I might fail that exam". Or, "This is anxiety".

## **Free yourself from the past and future**

You can practise mindfulness anywhere, but it can be especially helpful to take a mindful approach if you realise that, for several minutes, you have been "trapped" in reliving past problems or "pre-living" future worries.

## Contact details

If you have any other problems/queries please contact:

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Therapists work with people of all ages, helping them to carry out the activities they need to do in order to lead healthy and fulfilling lives.

## References

If you require a full list of references for this leaflet please email [patient.information@ulh.nhs.uk](mailto:patient.information@ulh.nhs.uk)

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