

INSOMNIA

by Dr. Sara Ohgushi, Naturopathic Physician

Q: I'm really having trouble sleeping these days. Are there any alternatives to sleeping medications?

A: Most people experience some degree of insomnia at some point in their lives. When you're in it, it might seem it will never end and that fear can make the insomnia worse. And you really do need to sleep. Contrary to some popular public opinion, it is not true that the less sleep the better. Sleep is fundamental to good health; it is the time during which our body repairs and recuperates.

Insomnia often comes with times of stress. Under stress, our bodies produce more of the stress hormones including cortisol, which increases alertness and helps us get through the stressful situation. Cortisol levels normally are higher in the morning to help us get up and going, and lowest in the evening, allowing us to relax and sleep. However, under high stress conditions (common in modern society) people get stuck in the high cortisol mode. This is a major factor with sleep difficulties.

Therefore, anything you can do to lower your stress levels, such as taking some time off, changing jobs, or ending a bad relationship, is important. See the insomnia as a red flag from your body that changes need to be made, before a more serious stress related health consequence (such as a heart attack or chronic fatigue syndrome) results.

To cope with insomnia, first create a bedtime routine. This may include a healthy snack including some protein, a hot bath, a cup of relaxing herbal tea such as chamomile or mint, and a few stretching exercises. Reading helps many people nod off but others get involved in the story and end up staying up later. Obviously, exciting or disturbing reading material is not the best choice. Similarly, the late night news is not generally conducive to good sleep.

If you find yourself awake at night in bed without feeling drowsy, don't just toss and turn- get out of bed for awhile! Write down whatever is on your mind- make lists, write a letter to that person you're thinking about (you may or may not send it), have a cup of herbal tea, take a bath or shower, read an enjoyable book, and/or have a little snack. And don't count exactly

how many hours of sleep you have had or not had! At some point you'll likely feel tired again and can return to bed. Then if you're sleepy during the day, try to arrange your schedule to allow yourself naps.

Physical exercise is very important for good sleep. Your mind may be exhausted from the stresses of work, but your body just sat in a chair for most of the day. Find some kind of aerobic exercise to do, in which your heart rate is increased. Examples include dancing, jogging, or fast walking, at least 3 times a week. If you're not used to it start with slow or moderate walking for 10-15 minutes and work up to faster walking for 30-45 min.

Yoga is an excellent way to release stress and help your body relax. Yoga can teach you to focus on your breathing and breathe in different ways, which can be an excellent part of your bedtime routine. Even one class a week can make a difference.

Avoid coffee and all stimulants, which help keep you in the high cortisol state. Instead, take a B-complex supplement with breakfast and/or lunch to support your body through the stress. (On an empty stomach B supplements may cause nausea.) It will often give you a little energy without stressing your body further.

Sleeping medications are often strong and can leave you feeling "drugged" in the morning. Many people are dependent on sleep medications to sleep, but this is far from an ideal situation, and medications should be seen as a very short-term strategy to get you through a crisis, at best.

One supplement worth trying is melatonin. Melatonin is a natural hormone which normally is higher in the evening and is part of how we get to sleep. Melatonin does not generally have side effects, and has even been found to have some antioxidant and anticancer properties. It is available over-the-counter at many drugstores or where supplements are sold. Nonpregnant adults can take 3 mg 1-2 hours before bed. As it may cause drowsiness, do not take it when you are going to be driving or operating machinery.

These are just a few things that can help many people with occasional insomnia. However, some cases of insomnia are more persistent and challenging. In such cases a more individualized approach is necessary. There are many strategies in naturopathic medicine to try besides prescription medications; do not suffer needlessly!

Note: This article is not meant to substitute for direct medical advice. For more details, references to this article or questions, email Dr. Ohgushi at sao@imagina.com, or call her at 503-703-7825 to schedule a free 20 minute consultation. Dr. Ohgushi is licensed in Natural Childbirth and provides full prenatal, birth and postpartum services. As a Naturopathic Physician she also maintains a general family practice including pediatric care. OFFICE: 2304 E. Burnside, Suite 101, by appointment only.

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