



A - Z of Health - 'I' for Insomnia

If you suffer from insomnia, this means you regularly have problems sleeping. You may have difficulty falling asleep, or staying asleep as long as you want to. This is different from the lack of sleep caused by having to get up regularly to carry out your caring responsibilities, for instance; it is about those times you have every opportunity to sleep but just can't. However, this can be even more of a problem if both insomnia and night time caring are preventing you from getting the sleep you need.

How do you know if you have insomnia?

You have insomnia if you regularly:

- find it hard to go to sleep
- wake up several times during the night
- lie awake at night
- wake up early and can't go back to sleep
- still feel tired after waking up
- find it hard to nap during the day even though you're tired
- feel tired and irritable during the day
- find it difficult to concentrate during the day because you're tired

You can have these symptoms for months, sometimes years.

You will find a self-assessment questionnaire to help you consider your personal situation at the end of this article: www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia

Some people just don't need as much sleep as others, but on average adults need about 7-9 hours each night. However, if you're feeling tired constantly, chances are you're not getting enough sleep.

So what can cause insomnia?

The most common causes of long term insomnia are stress, anxiety or depression. The following factors can also affect sleep in general and these common causes of long term insomnia:

- noise
- a room that's too hot or cold
- uncomfortable beds
- alcohol, caffeine or nicotine
- recreational drugs like cocaine or ecstasy
- jet lag
- shift work



What can you do if you have insomnia?

There is a lot of advice on what experts refer to as 'sleep hygiene'. Good sleep hygiene is about practising a variety of healthy lifestyle and sleep habits that can improve your ability to fall asleep and stay asleep. Small changes can have a huge impact on your sleep quality and quantity, and might include the following suggestions:

- go to bed and wake up at the same time every day – only go to bed when you feel tired
- relax at least 1 hour before bed – for example, take a bath or read a book
- make sure your bedroom is dark and quiet – use thick curtains, blinds, an eye mask or ear plugs
- exercise during the day
- make sure your mattress, pillows and covers are comfortable
- and some things NOT to do:
 - don't smoke, or drink alcohol, tea or coffee at least 6 hours before going to bed
 - don't eat a big meal late at night
 - don't exercise within 4 hours of going to bed
 - don't watch television or use devices right before going to bed – the bright light makes you more awake
 - don't nap during the day
 - don't drive when you feel sleepy
 - don't sleep in after a bad night's sleep – stick to your regular sleeping hours instead

It is worth trying self-help methods to deal with insomnia, but if it persists regardless of what you do, you may want to consider seeking professional help

You can get sleeping aids from a pharmacy. However, they won't get rid of your insomnia and they have many side effects. Sleeping aids can often make you drowsy the next day. You might find it hard to get things done and affects your ability to drive the day after taking them.

You may want to consider seeking help from your GP if:

- changing your sleeping habits hasn't worked
- you've had trouble sleeping for months
- your insomnia is affecting your daily life in a way that makes it hard for you to cope

Your GP will try to find out what's causing your insomnia so you get the right treatment. Sometimes you will be referred to a therapist for cognitive behavioural therapy. This can help you change the thoughts and behaviours that keep you from sleeping.

GPs now rarely prescribe sleeping pills to treat insomnia. Sleeping pills can have serious side effects and you can become dependent on them. Sleeping pills are only prescribed for a few days, or weeks at the most, if your insomnia is very bad.

Find out more about managing insomnia and other conditions on the NHS Choices website www.nhs.uk/conditions. The Sleep Council also have relevant information: sleepcouncil.org.uk/