

Insomnia (Poor Sleep)

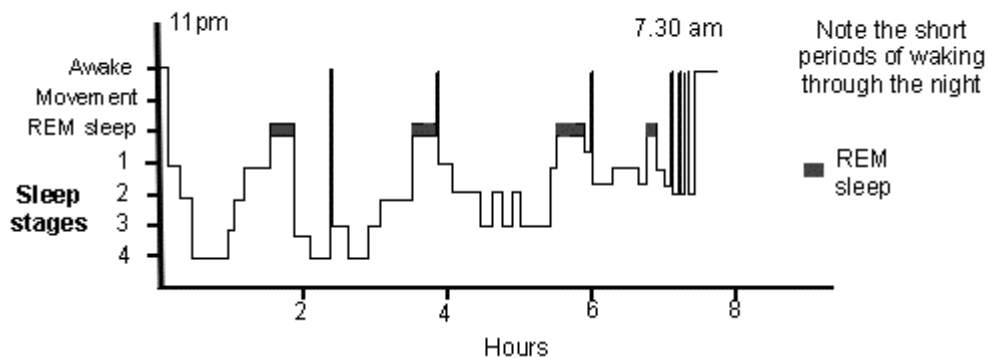
Poor sleep is a common problem, particularly in older people. There are many causes. There are several things that you can do to help promote good sleep - detailed below. Sleeping tablets are not usually advised, but a short course is sometimes helpful.

Understanding normal sleep

A normal nights sleep has three main parts.

1. Quiet sleep. This is divided into stages 1-4. Each stage becomes more 'deep'.
2. REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. REM sleep is when the brain is very active, but the body is limp apart from the eyes, which move rapidly. Most dreaming occurs during REM sleep.
3. Short periods of waking for 1-2 minutes.

Hypnogram - a recording of a normal nights sleep, displayed here as a chart



Each night, about 4-5 periods of quiet sleep alternate with 4-5 periods of REM sleep. In addition, several short periods of waking for 1-2 minutes occur about every 2 hours or so, but more frequently towards the end of the nights sleep. The graph above shows a typical normal pattern of sleep in a young adult.

Normally, you do not remember the times that you wake if they last less than 2 minutes. If you are distracted during the wakeful times (for example, a partner snoring, traffic noise, fear of being awake, etc), then the wakeful times tend to last longer, and you are more likely to remember them.

What is a normal amount of sleep?

Different people need different amounts of sleep. Some people function well, and are not tired during the day, with just 3-4 hours sleep a night. Most people need more than this. To need 7-8 hours per night is average. Most people establish a pattern that is normal for them in their early adult life. It is normal to need less sleep as you become older. For people aged over 70 about 6 hours sleep per night is average.

What is insomnia?

Insomnia means poor sleep. About 1 in 5 adults do not get as much sleep, as they would like. Poor sleep can mean:

- Not being able to get off to sleep.
- Waking up too early.
- Waking for long periods in the night.
- Not feeling refreshed after a nights sleep.

If you have poor sleep, you may be tired in the daytime, have reduced concentration, become irritable, or just not function well.

What are the causes of poor sleep?

Poor sleep may develop for no apparent reason. However, there are a number of possible causes.

Concern about wakefulness

You may remember the normal times of being awake in the night. You may feel that to wake in the night is not normal, and worry about getting back off to sleep. You may 'clock watch', and check the time each time you wake up. This may cause irritation or anxiety, and you are more likely to remember the times of wakefulness. You may then have an impression of having bad nights sleep, even if the total amount of time asleep was normal.

Temporary problems

Poor sleep is often temporary. This may be because of stress, a work or family problem, jet lag, a change of routine, a strange bed, etc. Poor sleep in these situations usually improves in time.

Anxiety or depression

You may find it difficult to switch-off your anxieties about work or home problems.

Poor sleep is sometimes due to depression. Other symptoms of depression include: a low mood, lethargy, poor concentration, tearfulness, and persistent negative thoughts. Depression is common, and treatment of the depression often cures the poor sleep too.

Sleep apnea

This sometimes occurs in obese people who snore, more commonly in obese men. In this condition, the large airways narrow or collapse as you fall asleep. This not only causes snoring, but also reduces the amount of oxygen that gets to the lungs. This causes you to wake up to breath properly. There can be many awakenings each night, resulting in daytime tiredness. (Note: most people who snore sleep well, and do not have sleep apnea.)

Other illnesses

Various illnesses keep some people awake. For example, illness causing pain, breathlessness, and leg cramps, indigestion, cough, itch, hot flushes, dementia, mental health problems, etc.

Stimulants

These can interfere with sleep. In particular, there are three things to avoid.

- Alcohol - many people take an alcoholic drink to help sleep. Alcohol actually causes broken sleep and early morning wakefulness.
- Caffeine - which is in tea, coffee, some soft drinks such as cola, and even chocolate. It is also in some painkiller tablets and other medicines (check the ingredients on the medicine packet). Caffeine is a stimulant and may cause poor sleep.
- Nicotine (from smoking) is a stimulant, and it would help not to smoke.

Prescribed medicines

Some medicines interfere with sleep. For example, diuretics ('water tablets'), some antidepressants, steroids, beta-blockers, some slimming tablets, painkillers containing caffeine, and some cold remedies containing pseudoephedrine. Also, if you suddenly stop taking regular sleeping tablets or other sedative medicines, this can cause 'rebound' poor sleep.

Street drugs

Ecstasy, cocaine, and amphetamines can affect sleep.

Unrealistic expectations

Some people just need less sleep than others. If your sleep pattern has not changed, and you do not feel sleepy during the day, then you are probably getting enough sleep. Older people and people who do little exercise tend to need less sleep. Some people think they should be able to nap during the day - and sleep at night!

A vicious cycle

Whatever the initial cause, worry about poor sleep, and worry about feeling tired the next day, are common reasons for the problem to become worse.

What can I do to help improve poor sleep?

Understanding

It may help simply to understand that short periods of waking each night are normal. Also that worry about poor sleep can itself make things worse.

Body rhythms

Try to get into a routine of wakefulness during the day, and sleepiness at night. The body becomes used to rhythms or routines. If you keep to a pattern, you are more likely to sleep well. So:

- No matter how tired you are, do not sleep or nap during the day if you have poor sleep at night.
- It is best to go to bed only when sleepy-tired in the late evening.
- Switch the light out as soon as you get into bed.
- Always get up at the same time each day, 7 days a week, however short the time asleep. Use an alarm to help with this. Resist the temptation to 'lie-in'.

The bedroom

The idea is to associate the bedroom as a quiet, relaxing place to sleep.

- It should not be too hot, cold, or noisy.
- Earplugs and eyeshades may be useful if you are sleeping with a snoring or wakeful partner.
- Make sure the bedroom is dark with good curtains to stop early morning sunlight.
- Don't use the bedroom for activities such as work, eating or television.

- Consider changing your bed if it is old, or not comfortable.

Mood and atmosphere

Try to relax and 'wind down' with a routine before going to bed. For example, a stroll followed by a bath, some reading, and a warm drink (without caffeine) may be relaxing in the late evening. Do not do anything that is mentally demanding within 90 minutes of going to bed. Go to bed when sleepy-tired. Some people find playing soft music is helpful at bedtime. Try a player with a time switch that turns the music off after about 30 minutes.

Relaxation tapes

These are commonly available. One may help with sleep, particularly if you find that anxiety at bedtime is affecting your sleep. However, a relaxation tape may help even if you are not anxious, but find it hard to get off to sleep. Relaxation tapes often take you through deep breathing exercises, and teach you how to relax the muscles.

Avoid stimulants

You should not drink alcohol for a few hours before bedtime. Also, do not have food, medicines, or drinks that contain caffeine or other stimulants before bedtime (see above). Some people have found benefit from cutting out caffeine completely through the entire day. Don't smoke.

Exercise

You should not do strenuous exercise near to bedtime. However, mild stretching exercises may help to relax just before bedtime.

But, some people find the reason they can't sleep is that, although the brain is tired, the body has not been tired enough during the day. If possible, do some exercise each day. Even a walk in the afternoon or early evening is better than nothing. Daytime exercise can help you to feel more relaxed and tired at bedtime.

Food and drink

You should avoid eating large meals before bedtime.

If you cannot get off to sleep

Get up if you find you are unable to sleep after 20-30 minutes. Go into another room, and do something else such as reading or watching TV rather than brooding in bed. Go back to bed when sleepy. You can repeat this as often as necessary until you are asleep.

See a doctor if you feel that illness, depression, or medication is causing poor sleep.

What about sleeping tablets?

Sleeping tablets are not usually advised

Sleeping tablets used to be commonly taken. However, they have been shown to have problems, and are now not commonly prescribed. Possible problems with sleeping tablets include:

- Drowsiness the next day. You may not be safe to drive or to operate machinery.
- Clumsiness and confusion in the night if you have to get up. For example, if you have had a sleeping tablet, you may fall over if you get up to go to the toilet in the night. (Older people who take sleeping tablets have an increased risk of breaking their hip.)
- Tolerance to sleeping tablets may develop if you take them regularly. This means that, in time, the usual dose has no effect. You then need a higher dose to help with sleep. In time, the higher

dose then has no effect, and so on.

- Some people become dependant (addicted) on sleeping tablets, and have withdrawal symptoms if the tablets are stopped suddenly.

Sometimes a sleeping tablet is advised

If a sleeping tablet is prescribed, it is usually for just a short course (a week or so) to get over a particularly bad patch. Sleeping tablets are best taken on only 2 or 3 nights per week, rather than on every night. This prevents tolerance or dependence to the tablet from developing. There are various types of sleeping tablets. Your doctor will advise.