

- Insomnia
- Physical Activity
- Eating Well
- Drugs and Alcohol

What is Insomnia?

Sleep serves a restorative function for the body and the brain. It is important to daily functioning, as it can influence health, moods, behavior, relationships, and work and school performance. There are differences in the amount of sleep people require. In general, adults should receive about 7-9 hours of sleep per night. (Jones, 2017).

Insomnia occurs when individuals have difficulty falling or staying asleep and not feel refreshed by the amount of sleep they receive. It is associated with feelings of distress, fatigue and/or impaired daytime functioning (e.g. academic, social, occupational). Insomnia may be a short-term problem, a recurring difficulty or become chronic (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Approximately three quarters of those who experience depression have symptoms of insomnia. Difficulties initiating and maintaining sleep are common. About 40% of young adults who are struggling with depressed mood experience hypersomnia (Nutt, Wilson and Paterson, 2008).

- **Initial insomnia** – difficulty falling asleep
- **Middle insomnia** – waking up in the night and having difficulty returning to sleep
- **Late insomnia** – waking up too early and having difficulty returning to sleep
- **Hypersomnia** – prolonged sleep episodes at night or increased daytime sleep.

What Increases the Risk for Insomnia?

Many factors can contribute to the development of insomnia. Some of these include the following:

- poor sleep habits (e.g., not maintaining a regular sleep-wake schedule)
- psychological problems (e.g., anxiety, depression)
- temperament (e.g., a tendency to repress emotions)
- environmental factors (e.g., noise)
- chronic stress (e.g., relationship problems, on-going academic concerns)
- medications/medical problems (e.g., chronic back pain, hormonal changes)
- lifestyle (e.g., excessive caffeine use, eating late in the evening)
- beliefs and attitudes about sleep (e.g. believing that you cannot manage the negative consequences of disturbed sleep)

Remember that it can be normal to experience short-term problems with sleep during times of excitement, when feeling stressed or worried (e.g. when you have an upcoming exam), during an illness (e.g. bronchitis), at high altitudes (e.g. while on a ski trip), or when you have jet lag (i.e. traveled across time zones). Unresolved sleep problems, however, result in a greater risk for the recurrence of depression (Nutt, Wilson and Patterson, 2008).

Insomnia, a symptom of depression, also interferes with efforts to resolve depression. Take it seriously and use strategies to overcome it.

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Getting the ZZZs You Need

- **Consult a physician if your sleep difficulties are persistent and interfere with your daily life.** It is important to rule out a sleep disorder or a physiological cause for your insomnia. Also, ask your doctor about any prescription medication you may be taking to ensure that it is not aggravating your sleep problems.
- **Increase the amount of exposure** you receive to natural light.
- **Reduce exposure to blue light** (from electronic devices) at the end of the day.
- **Establish a regular sleep-wake schedule** (i.e. a regular time to go to bed and get up in the morning). Make this schedule as consistent as possible.
- **Maintain a comfortable sleep environment.** Many people find that a dark, cool, quiet bedroom is conducive to good sleep. Use a comfortable bed (e.g. not too lumpy, big enough, etc.).
- **Try to minimize sleep interruptions** (e.g. put your cat outside).
- **Avoid using your bedroom as a place to work**, study, eat, or socialize with friends. Over time, you may begin to associate your room with these activities, instead of sleep.
- **Wind down** before bed.
- **Try to avoid large, heavy dinners late in the evening**, and snacks that may give you heartburn or indigestion (e.g. spicy, fatty, or garlic-flavored foods).
- **Fear of not being able to fall asleep, or return to sleep after awakening can prolong sleep problems.** The more you are concerned about not sleeping, the more difficult it will be to sleep. Practice diverting your thoughts from your worry about insomnia (e.g. imagine yourself engaging in a pleasant activity). In addition, you may find it useful to cover your alarm clock.
- **Practice deep breathing;** it promotes relaxation and can make it easier to fall asleep.
- **Count random numbers** (e.g., “1, 27, 67, 14...”). This distracts from worries, but is not demanding enough to keep you awake.
- **If you can’t sleep after 15 minutes, get up and do something quiet** (e.g., read a book); when tired, go back to bed; repeat as many times as necessary. Get up at your alarm and don’t nap the next day.
- **Don’t stay in bed too long.** The longer you stay in bed beyond your average sleep time (~seven to nine hours for most adults), the worse you may sleep. Over time, your sleep can become shallower and less restorative as you try to “catch up” by spreading your sleep over a longer period. Hence, extending the time you spend in bed will not likely help you overcome insomnia.
- **Exercise**, but not too late in the day.
- **Try to eat nutritious meals.** People who lack proper nutrients can have problems with insomnia.
- **Avoid the excessive caffeine.** Sleep quality can be impacted by consuming caffeine up to 6 hours before bed.
- **Do not use alcohol as a sleeping aid.** Some believe that a “night cap” will help them to fall asleep. However, even a single drink before bed can cause fragmented sleep. Moreover, there is a danger of slipping into alcohol dependency.
- **Avoid long or irregular daytime naps** as they can reduce sleep quality.
- **There are times when sleeping medication may be of benefit** (e.g. periods of intense grief). This medication is intended for short-term use, as there is a risk of drug dependence. Speak to your physician.

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Physical Activity And Depression

Research tells us that exercise can be an effective way to help prevent and treat depression (Walton, 2017).

Exercise may help ease depressed mood because of the release of endorphins and the opportunity to distract from stressors. In addition, regular exercise provides emotional benefits, including increased confidence and seeing oneself coping in a healthy manner (Mayo Clinic, 2017).

Canadian physical activity guidelines suggest that adults between the ages of 18 and 64 should engage in 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic exercise (in bouts of 10 minutes or more) per week. More exercise provides greater health benefits. Adding muscle and bone strengthening exercise at least 2 days per week is also beneficial (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 2020).

Moderate intensity activities include brisk walking and bike riding. Vigorous activities, such as running and cross-country skiing, result in sweating and being “out of breath.” (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, 2020).

When feeling depressed, it can be difficult to begin exercising and to stay motivated. Here are some tips:

- Choose activities you enjoy
- Talk to your family physician or therapist about how exercise fits into your treatment plan
- Set realistic goals
- Schedule your exercise sessions as you would a physician or therapy appointment. View exercise as an important tool to help you feel better
- Identify potential barriers to regular exercise (e.g., find it boring) and problem-solve solutions (e.g., exercise with a friend)
- Expect setbacks, keep trying and seek the support of those who encourage you (Mayo Clinic, 2017)

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Eating and Depression

The food you consume has an impact on your health, including your mental health. Research has suggested that a healthy diet is linked to a significantly reduced risk of developing low mood. Choosing food such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, fish and olive oil is associated with a reduced risk for depression (Tello, 2018).

The Canada Food Guide recommends eating plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and proteins. It also suggests limiting highly processed foods, drinking lots of water and carefully reading food labels for nutrition information (Government of Canada, 2019).

Canada’s Food Guide speaks to not only what people should eat, but how they should eat. It suggests being mindful when eating, cooking more often and enjoying your food. The Guide also suggests avoiding eating alone. Culturally, food is an important part of celebrations and social interactions. When people eat together, they reinforce healthy eating habits and foster social connections. There are physical and mental health benefits of sharing meals with others (Laucius, 2019).

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Laucius, J. (2019, January 23). *New Canada's Food Guide not just about what we should eat – but how we should eat*. Retrieved from: <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/better-than-eating-alone>

Tello, M. (2018, February 22). *Diet and Depression*. Retrieved from: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/diet-and-depression-2018022213309>

Caffeine and Nicotine

Caffeine

While there are individual differences in sensitivity to caffeine, it produces the same physiological arousal that is triggered when you are stressed. Too much caffeine can leave you feeling nervous and restless and can contribute to insomnia. Reducing the amount of caffeine consumed can be beneficial in the improved management of depression.

If you choose to reduce your caffeine intake, do so gradually. An abrupt reduction can produce unpleasant withdrawal symptoms (e.g. fatigue, headaches). In order to reduce feelings of tension, experiment to find out what your own daily caffeine limit is.

Nicotine

Nicotine is a strong stimulant that increases physiological arousal and stresses the cardiovascular system. While some smokers report that cigarettes help to calm them, research indicates that smokers tend to sleep less well and be more anxious than nonsmokers.

If you decide to quit smoking, speak to your family doctor or a pharmacist about strategies to assist you in doing so.

Bourne, E. (2020). *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*. (7th ed.) Oakland: New Harbinger Publications.

Both caffeine and nicotine interfere with your ability to better manage depression.

Drugs and Alcohol

As many as one third of individuals with major depression have an alcohol problem. Some believe that using drugs and alcohol can help them to cope with the symptoms of depression and relieve emotional pain. This relief, however, is only temporary. Over time, drugs and alcohol may become addictive, result in health problems, interfere with school and work and worsen depressive symptoms. In addition, substance abuse can increase the risk for suicide. If you are experiencing difficulties with substance abuse, speak to your family doctor or a therapist for assistance.

Juergens, J. (2020, June 18). *Depression*. Retrieved from <https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/depression-and-addiction/>

Problematic drug and alcohol use exacerbates depression, interferes with efforts to overcome mood problems and contributes to numerous other life difficulties.