



**S**leep serves a restorative function for your body and brain. It is important to daily functioning, as it can influence your health, mood, behavior, relationships and work/school performance. There are large differences in the amount of sleep people require. A good night's sleep can range from several hours for some people, to more than ten hours for others (*Hauri and Linde, 1996*).

# Insomnia

## WHAT IS INSOMNIA?

Insomnia occurs when individuals have difficulty falling or staying asleep, or do 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, or last for weeks and become chronic (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

## HOW CAN I BETTER MANAGE INSOMNIA?

While there is no single treatment for insomnia, some of the suggestions listed below may be helpful.

- Consult your family doctor or a physician at the Student Health Centre if your insomnia is persistent and interferes with your daily life. It is important to rule out another sleep disorder (e.g. breathing-related 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.
- Establish a regular sleep-wake schedule (i.e. a regular time to go to bed and get up in the morning), particularly a regular time of to rise in the morning. Make this schedule as consistent as possible (e.g. same on weekends as during the week).
- Maintain a comfortable sleep environment. Many people find that a dark, quiet bedroom is conducive to good sleep. Use a comfortable bed (e.g. not too lumpy, big enough, etc.). Avoid temperature extremes in the room.
- 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. Stop working or studying at least 30 minutes prior to going to bed. Spend this time enjoying a relaxing activity such as listening to music or reading a favorite novel.
- 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). Some suggest that a bedtime snack that is high in tryptophan can help promote sleep. Milk, eggs, cheese and chicken are some foods that contain this naturally occurring amino acid.

## WHAT CAUSES INSOMNIA?

Many factors can contribute to the development of insomnia, including the following:

- poor sleep habits (e.g. not maintaining a regular sleep-wake schedule)
- psychological problems (e.g. depression, anxiety)
- chronic stress (e.g. relationship problems, on-going academic concerns)
- medical problems (e.g. allergies, chronic back pain, hormonal changes)
- lifestyle (e.g. diet, lack of exercise)
- beliefs and attitudes about sleep (e.g. believing that you cannot manage the negative consequences of disturbed sleep can contribute to, or prolong sleep problems) (Hauri and Linde, 1996).
- Remember that it is normal to experience short-term problems with sleep during times of excitement, when feeling stressed or worried (e.g. when you have a forthcoming exam), during an illness (e.g. bronchitis), at high altitudes (e.g. while on a ski trip), or when you have jet lag.

## HOW CAN I BETTER MANAGE INSOMNIA? *(Continued)*

- 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 to avoid watching the time pass as you prepare to fall asleep.
- Practise deep breathing. Slow, abdominal breathing promotes relaxation and can make it easier to fall asleep.
- Don't stay in bed too long. The longer you stay in bed beyond your average sleep time (approximately seven to eight 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. Cut down on the amount of time in bed.
- Exercise on a regular basis. Twenty to thirty minutes of exercise, several times per week may help promote sleep.
- Try to eat nutritious meals. People who lack proper nutrients in their diet can have problems with insomnia.
- Avoid excessive use of caffeine. As little as two cups of coffee or two cola drinks consumed in a day can interfere with sleep.
- Try to stop smoking. The nicotine in cigarettes is a stimulant that can produce or aggravate insomnia.
- 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. If you think you have a problem with substance abuse, seek assistance.
- There are times when sleeping medication may be beneficial (e.g. periods of intense grief). This medication is intended for short-term use, as there is a risk of drug dependence. If you and your doctor decide that sleeping medication may be helpful, use it with caution. Sleeping medication can have a negative impact on your functioning the next day (e.g. less able to perform tasks with speed and accuracy), can have unpleasant side-effects (e.g. nausea, digestive upset, dizziness) and can cause "rebound insomnia" (i.e. disturbed sleep that can occur for several nights after discontinuing the use of sleeping medication). Never mix alcohol and sleeping medication—this can be fatal.
- Remember that problems with sleep can be related to a mood disturbance (e.g. depression, anxiety) or to problems in managing stress. If you feel this is your situation, contact a mental health professional.

## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

If you are experiencing problems with insomnia contact your family doctor, a physician at the **Student Health Centre (966-5768)**, or **Student Counselling Services (966-4920)**.

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American Psychiatric Association (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. (4th ed.).

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Hauri, P. & Linde, S. (1996). *No More Sleepless Nights: A Proven Program to Conquer Insomnia*. New York:

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