

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**INSOMNIA****WHAT IS INSOMNIA?**

Insomnia is difficulty falling and/or staying asleep. One in three Americans is estimated to have occasional problems with insomnia, while one in ten has a chronic sleep issue. Your grades, work, relationships, health, and mental well-being can suffer as a result of this condition.

**WHAT CAUSES INSOMNIA?**

- ❖ Insomnia that lasts less than 3 months is often associated with an identifiable stressor, such as changes in routine or in your sleep environment, illnesses, major life events, medications, and substance use (caffeine, alcohol, drugs, etc.). Other causes include circadian rhythm disorders, such as jet lag or shift work.
- ❖ Chronic insomnia lasts more than 3 months, occurs at least 3 times a week, and may be related to:
  - Poor sleep hygiene.
  - Learned sleep-preventing behaviors (ie. difficulty relaxing, racing thoughts, worrying about not sleeping).
  - Medical problems (ie. conditions that cause pain, shortness of breath, etc.).
  - Psychiatric disorders (ie. depression, anxiety).
  - Sleep disorders (ie. sleep apnea, restless legs).
  - No identifiable cause.

**KEEP A SLEEP DIARY**

Recording your sleep habits for 1-2 weeks can help determine what type of lifestyle changes will improve sleep and if an underlying cause exists. Keep track of the following:

- When you go to bed and wake up.
- How long it takes to fall asleep.
- How often you wake up during the night.
- What you do when you can't sleep.
- Total sleep time.
- If you take naps during the day.
- When you last eat or drink.
- When you exercise.
- Your mood when you wake up in the morning.

**HOW MUCH SLEEP DO I NEED?**

"Sufficient sleep" varies from person to person. However, most adults need 7-8 hours of sleep per night and most adolescents need 8-9 hours of sleep. Studies suggest that college students typically get only 6 hours of sleep per night. This type of sleep deprivation may not be due to insomnia. However, it can lead to the same problems.

**BEHAVIOR THERAPY**

Behavioral treatments aimed at teaching new sleep habits and improving sleep behavior are recommended

as first-line treatments for insomnia. They are typically equally or more effective than sleeping pills. Behavior therapies include education about sleep hygiene, relaxation techniques, stimulus control, cognitive behavioral therapy, and more.

**PRINCIPLES OF SLEEP HYGIENE**

Learning to have healthy sleep habits is the best way to treat insomnia. However, patience is key! It takes time to retrain your brain to listen to your body's natural sleep signals. Consider the following tips for better sleep:

- ❖ **Stick to a schedule.** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even if you didn't get enough sleep. This includes weekends and holidays. This will help train your body to sleep at night.
- ❖ **Develop a bedtime routine.** Wind down at the end of the day by reading a magazine for 10 minutes, listening to soft music, and/or meditating. Eventually your brain will associate these actions with sleep.
- ❖ **Rest your brain.** Don't study, use your smartphone, check your email, or do other brain-busy activities late at night. Your body can't rest if your mind is in overdrive.
- ❖ **Use your bed only for sleep and sex.** This will train your brain to associate your bed with sleep. Don't eat, use your phone/computer, watch TV, study, or worry in bed.
- ❖ **Make your bed.** Sleep on a mattress that is comfortable and offers good orthopedic support.
- ❖ **Keep it dark.** Darkness signals your brain that it's time to sleep. Melatonin, a hormone that induces sleep, cannot be produced by the brain in the presence of blue light. Blue light is found in sunlight and in the lights of many electronic devices (ie. laptops, tablets, smart phones, TVs, etc.). So turn off these devices at least 15-20 minutes before bed.
- ❖ **Keep it quiet.** Use "white noise" machines or apps, fans, earplugs, and/or heavy curtains to mask noises.
- ❖ **Keep it cool.** A slightly cool room mimics your body's internal temperature drop during sleep.
- ❖ **Take a warm shower or bath.** Doing this before you go to bed is relaxing for the mind and body. The drop in body temperature after a warm shower also signals your brain that it's time to sleep.
- ❖ **Avoid taking naps.** If you have to nap, limit naps to no longer than 30-60 minutes and no later than 3 pm. Sleeping during the day will only keep you up at night.
- ❖ **Avoid beverages at bedtime.** This will keep your bladder from waking you up at night.
- ❖ **Don't consume a full meal before bedtime.** Heavy meals can cause insomnia, so avoid eating large meals 2 hours before bed. Spicy and fatty foods can also cause heartburn, which can interfere with sleep.

- ❖ **Don't go to bed hungry.** Try a light bedtime snack that contains tryptophan, a natural sleep-promoting substance. Examples include milk and other dairy products, tuna, and turkey.
- ❖ **Avoid caffeine.** Do not drink or consume caffeine within 3-4 hours of bedtime. Remember that chocolate and many prescription and non-prescription medications (like decongestants) contain caffeine or other stimulants.
- ❖ **Avoid alcohol.** Do not drink alcohol within 4-6 hours of bedtime. It may help you fall asleep more easily, but it can disrupt sleep later in the night, cause nightmares, and worsen sleep apnea.
- ❖ **Avoid nicotine.** Like other stimulants, nicotine can keep you up. Nicotine withdrawal can also interrupt night-time sleep. Smokers who kick the habit usually fall asleep easier and awaken less during the night.
- ❖ **Exercise regularly.** Moderate-intensity exercise (for at least 20 minutes) performed more than 6 hours before bedtime can promote better and deeper sleep; however, exercising within 3-4 hours of sleep can increase serotonin levels and keep you awake.
- ❖ **Reduce and manage stress.**
  - Put your worries away before you go to bed. Take 15 minutes after dinner to write down your worries and what you can do about them.
  - Incorporate relaxation practices, like breathing exercises, meditation, and yoga, into your daily life. Keep reading for more info.
  - For individualized help with stress management, visit the [Health Promotion and Well-Being Center](#) (804-828-WELL) or [University Counseling Services](#) (804-828-6200 at Monroe Park or 804-828-3964 at MCV).

## **RELAXATION THERAPY**

Learn relaxation techniques to calm racing thoughts and promote sleep. Practice is key!

- ❖ **Mindful awareness.** The [Health Promotion and Well-Being Center](#) (the WELL) is a great place to learn more about mindfulness therapy. Helpful online resources include [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com), [marc.ucla.edu](http://marc.ucla.edu), & [www.richmondmeditates.vcu.edu](http://www.richmondmeditates.vcu.edu).
- ❖ **Breathing exercises.** Quiet your mind by focusing on your breath. Many variations exist. For example, take slow, deep breaths as you count to 5. Listen to the sound of your breath as you exhale. Repeat.
- ❖ **The relaxation response.** This is as easy as finding a comfortable position, closing your eyes, and allowing relaxation to spread through your body. Breathe gently through the abdomen, and focus on a peaceful word or image.
- ❖ **Progressive relaxation.** This exercise involves gently tightening then relaxing one muscle at a time until the entire body is relaxed. Begin with your face, and move down your body in the following sequence: the jaw and neck, upper arms, lower arms, fingers, chest, abdomen, buttocks, thighs, calves, and feet. Repeat this pattern.

## **STIMULUS CONTROL**

This strategy is an effective and healthy way to treat insomnia. Results are not immediate, so it is important

to try this method for at least 1 week. Sleep usually improves over successive nights, often in 2-4 days. During the treatment period, stick to the following rules:

- ❖ Do not go to bed until you are sleepy.
- ❖ If you can't fall asleep after 20 minutes, get up and leave the bedroom. Do something relaxing in low light, like reading a paper book/magazine or listening to soothing music. Avoid stimulating activities, like using your smartphone, watching TV, studying, eating, cleaning, etc. Return to bed only when you feel drowsy. If you are still awake after 20 minutes, repeat the process.
- ❖ Set an alarm clock to wake you up at the same time every day, including weekends.
- ❖ Do not take any daytime naps!
- ❖ Focus on getting rest, not necessarily sleep.

## **COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL THERAPY (CBT)**

CBT is a sleep training program that combines several behavioral techniques over a 4-10 week period. Patients meet with a trained therapist on a regular basis, often with excellent long-term results. A local resource and therapist is Dr. Bruce Rybarczyk at VCU's Department of Clinical Psychology. A reputable online course is also available at [www.sleepio.com](http://www.sleepio.com).

## **MEDICATIONS**

If all else fails, sleeping pills may be used in combination with behavioral therapy. Sleeping pills are not a cure for insomnia. They are only a temporary form of relief, and use should be limited to no more than a few weeks.

- ❖ **Over-The-Counter Sleep Aids**
  - **Antihistamines.** Most over-the-counter sleeping pills contain an antihistamine that causes drowsiness (eg. diphenhydramine, doxylamine). Examples include Tylenol PM, Sleepinal, and Unisom. Occasional use is safe. However, antihistamines may reduce the quality of your sleep & can cause residual morning drowsiness.
  - **Melatonin.** Melatonin is a hormone naturally produced by your body to regulate sleep and wake cycles. It is the only herbal medication shown to have some efficacy in scientific studies. It is most likely to help with circadian rhythm issues, like jet lag or shift work.
    - The recommended dosage is 0.2 - 0.3mg per night, though most preparations are sold at a higher dose.
    - Melatonin is believed to be safe with short-term use (3 months or less); however, little information is known about long-term safety.

**NOTE:** Herbal medications and supplements are not regulated by the FDA. Independent testing laboratories (such as [www.consumerlab.com](http://www.consumerlab.com)) can provide information about the quality and consistency of these products.

- ❖ **Prescription Medications.** If insomnia is interfering with your ability to function, prescription sleeping pills may be used for a limited period of time. Consult your medical provider for more information.

**MORE INFO:** [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org), [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)