

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

INSOMNIA**WHAT IS INSOMNIA?**

Insomnia is difficulty falling and/or staying asleep. One in three individuals in the US report 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. Short-term insomnia typically resolves when a stressor is removed or addressed.
- ❖ 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).
 - Medications, caffeine, or substance use.
 - 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 upon awakening in the morning.

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO I NEED?

"Sufficient sleep" varies from person to person.

- 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. Though this type of sleep deprivation may not be due to insomnia, it can lead to the same problems.

BEHAVIOR THERAPY

Behavioral treatments are considered first-line therapy for insomnia. They are aimed at teaching new sleep habits and improving sleep behavior. Examples include education about sleep hygiene, relaxation techniques, stimulus control, cognitive behavioral therapy, and more. Behavior therapies are typically equally or more effective than sleeping pills.

❖ **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:

- **Stick to a schedule.** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, even if you did not 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, listening to soft music, and/or meditating. Eventually your brain will associate these actions with sleep.

- **Rest your brain.** Avoid studying, using electronics, and other brain-busy activities before bed. Your brain is not a light switch that can be instantly turned off when it's time for sleep. Following a bedtime routine that includes restful activities will help your brain and body transition more easily to sleep.
- **Avoid electronics for 30-60 minutes before bed.** 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). Avoiding electronics before bed is one of the simplest and most important changes you can make for better sleep!
- **Avoid taking naps.** If you have to nap, limit naps to no more than 30-60 minutes and no later than 3pm. Sleeping during the day will make sleeping at night more difficult.
- **Use your bed only for sleep and sex.** This will train your brain to associate your bed with sleep. Do not eat, watch TV, study, work, or worry in 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.
- **Make your bed.** Sleep on a mattress that is comfortable and offers good orthopedic support.
- **Avoid beverages at bedtime.** This will keep your bladder from waking you up at night.
- **Avoid having a full meal before bed.** 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 for 3-4 hours before bed.** This includes chocolate and many prescription and non-prescription drugs (like decongestants) that contain caffeine or other stimulants.
- **Avoid alcohol.** Do not drink alcohol within 4-6 hours of bedtime. Alcohol 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 nighttime 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 bed can promote better and deeper sleep; however, exercise within 3-4 hours of sleep can increase serotonin levels and keep you up.
- **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.
 - Visit ramstrong.vcu.edu to explore VCU's collective health and well-being resources. Examples include RecWell (recwell.vcu.edu), University Counseling Services (counseling.vcu.edu), and the TimelyCare app (app.timelycare.com/auth/login), which offers FREE 24/7 access to virtual therapy services, health coaching, and self-care tools.

❖ **RELAXATION THERAPY**

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

- **Breathing exercises.** Relax and quiet your mind by focusing on your breath. Many variations exist.
 - For example, find a comfortable position, close your eyes, and take slow, deep breaths as you count to 5. Listen to the sound of your breath as you exhale. Repeat. Focus on a peaceful word or image if that is helpful; when your mind wanders, just gently bring your focus back to your word or image.
 - [Diaphragmatic breathing](#) calms your sympathetic nervous system and sends relaxing signals to your brain. Click on the link for detailed instructions. Another (simpler) way to breathe using your diaphragm is to put your hands on the back of your head while taking slow deep breaths.

- **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.
- **Mindfulness.** This is a type of meditation that focuses on being intensely aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the present moment without interpretation or judgement. Resources include www.uclahealth.org/programs/marc and mindfulness meditation apps, such as [Buddhify](#), [Calm](#), and [Headspace](#). Other ways to be mindful include slowing down and experiencing your environment with all your senses and being intentional about using an open, curious, and accepting mindset with all that you do.

❖ **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. Instructions are as follows:

- 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 is the preferred first-line treatment for chronic insomnia. It 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 VCUHS Psychiatry](#). A reputable online course is also available at 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 and often cause residual morning drowsiness.
- **Melatonin.** Melatonin is a hormone naturally produced by your brain 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.
 - Typical dosages range from 1 to 5mg per night, though doses below 1mg may be as effective. Dosing several hours before bedtime may also improve benefits.
 - Some experts recommend taking 100-300mcg 3 hours before bed (available as a liquid formulation at Whole Foods Market and online).
 - 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) 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. Consult your medical provider for more information regarding the risks and benefits of these medications.

RECOMMENDED WEBSITES: familydoctor.org, www.mayoclinic.org