

## Finding a Good Night's Sleep: Understanding Insomnia

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For those coping with a life-threatening illness, restful sleep is essential for a high quality of life. Insomnia may include difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep or finding refreshing sleep. Some diseases such as cancer and dementia put patients at increased risk for insomnia. The purpose of this information page is to help patients and families understand some treatments for insomnia and steps to take to improve sleep.

### 1. How can I help the doctor find possible causes for insomnia?

- Keep a sleep diary for several days including time awake at night and times of daytime napping.
- Talk to your physician about uncomfortable sensations such as pain or anxiety that occur at night.

### 2. What are some of the things I can do to become relaxed before falling asleep?

- Certain forms of therapy provided by a psychologist can lead to better sleep quality. These sessions may require at least 4 weeks to be effective.
- Relaxation techniques such as meditation and calming music can help the mind prepare for sleep.
- Warm milk and the scent of lavender are thought to help some individuals fall asleep faster.

### 3. What are some of the steps I can take to improve my sleep wake schedule?

- Limit the time spent in bed to that period of the night set aside for sleeping.
- Avoid daytime napping.
- Find a way to become regularly exposed to direct sunlight.
- Avoid consuming alcohol or coffee in the three hours before bedtime.
- Make the environment in the bedroom as comfortable as possible.

### 4. What types of medications are used to treat insomnia?

- Benzodiazepines are antianxiety medications that also cause a state of sleepiness; unfortunately, they may not be effective with continuous use.
- Antihistamines are used for seasonal allergies but also have the effect of making someone sleepy. These are available over the counter.
- Agitation, which is a state of confusion, may be the reason for disruptive sleep. Some medications used for agitation may also help with sleep.
- Medications for depression sometimes also have the added benefit of improving sleep.
- Alternative remedies like melatonin and valerian root have been reported to be helpful, though there is no clear evidence that they are effective sleep aids.

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The underlying cause of insomnia may actually be a reversible medical condition. Depression, anxiety, pain, and medication side effects are just some of the causes for insomnia. Sometimes, insomnia can be best treated by removing these underlying causes. Therefore, it is important to obtain regular advice and supervision of a physician when addressing insomnia.

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