

# Understanding Insomnia

This material aims to provide you with a better understanding of what insomnia is and ways to manage the condition.

Insomnia is a condition where a person has difficulty falling asleep, remaining asleep, or feels unrefreshed after sleeping. It is a widespread problem in the general population. It becomes a disorder when there is persistent difficulty with sleep onset, maintenance, consolidation, or sleep quality, occurring on at least three nights a week for over a month. This then leads to daytime distress and difficulty functioning.

Additionally, sleep and mental health are often interconnected. Addressing sleep problems can positively impact your emotional well-being, and improving mental health can lead to better sleep.

## Types of Insomnia

### Primary vs. Secondary Insomnia

- **Primary insomnia:**  
Occurs when no illness or secondary cause is identified.
- **Secondary insomnia:**  
Occurs when insomnia is a symptom of, or is associated with other conditions.



## Common Symptoms

During each episode of insomnia, symptoms typically persist for nearly every day and may include:



Difficulty falling asleep at night



Waking up frequently at night



Waking up too early with difficulty returning to sleep



Feeling fatigued and/or not well-rested after a night's sleep



Irritability, depression or anxiety



Difficulty paying attention, focusing on tasks or performing daily activities

It is crucial to consult a mental health professional for an accurate diagnosis.

## Sleep Difficulties in the Elderly

With older age, one might also experience changes in sleep patterns.

This can include:

- Taking longer time to fall asleep
- Waking up more often at night
- Waking up earlier
- Taking more naps during the day
- Having less deep sleep and more light sleep

Additionally, the elderly are more likely to face health issues that can disrupt their sleep. Examples of such health issues include:

- Overactive bladder or benign prostate enlargement (in men) which can lead to more frequent trips to the washroom at night
- Conditions like obstructive sleep apnea and heart problems affecting breathing during sleep
- Dementia

These disruptions and changes can affect both the duration and quality of their sleep.



## Causes and Risk Factors

### Lifestyle Factors

Unhealthy sleep habits, unfavourable environmental factors (too hot/cold/bright/noisy), irregular sleep schedules, excessive screen time before bedtime, excessive caffeine or alcohol consumption, excessive food consumption late in the evening, going to sleep on an empty stomach, and lack of physical activity can contribute to insomnia.



### Stress and Anxiety

High levels of stress or chronic worry can keep your mind active at night and make it difficult to relax and fall asleep.



### Medical Conditions

Certain medical conditions, like chronic pain, diabetes, asthma, overactive bladder, heart failure (difficulties in breathing while asleep) or gastrointestinal problems, can disrupt sleep patterns.



### Sleep-Related Disorders

Sleep apnea involves periodic breathing interruptions, disrupting your sleep. Restless legs syndrome triggers discomfort and a compelling urge to move your legs, potentially hindering the onset of sleep.



Consulting a mental health professional can help in understanding the specific factors that may be influencing an individual's experience of insomnia.

## Treatment Approaches for Insomnia

Insomnia can be effectively managed through various treatment approaches including:

### Psychotherapy

- Psychotherapy is a collaborative process where a psychologist works with individuals in finding ways to improve their wellbeing.
- It involves talking with a trained psychologist in a safe and confidential setting.

### Medication

- Medication works better in conjunction with non-pharmacological approaches.
- Medications may have side effects and risks, including dependency.
- It is important to consult your doctor on the use of medication for managing insomnia. This involves consulting your doctor on when to take the medication, usually about an hour before bedtime for most of the people, including someone with dementia.
- Regular check-ins with a healthcare provider are crucial to monitor the effectiveness of the medication, assess for any side effects and make adjustments as needed.

\*Side note for caregiver of dementia patient: If someone with dementia is having trouble sleeping or their night time behaviour (i.e. shouting, agitation or wandering at night) is distressing for the family, it is advisable to talk to a doctor for appropriate medical treatment.

You and your healthcare provider will work together to determine the best approach for your unique situation. It is important to communicate openly with your provider about your progress and any concerns you may have.

## Helpful Sleep Habits and Lifestyle Changes

By practising helpful sleep habits and making positive adjustments to daily routines, individuals can promote better sleep patterns and improve sleep quality. You may select and start applying some of the practices from the list below:

During the Day	Before/During Bedtime
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Set regular waking time and stick to it even during weekends and holidays.</li><li>• Get sunlight during the day.</li><li>• Turn on the light and allow sunlight into the room to maintain brightness in the room.</li><li>• Engage in regular and meaningful/constructive daily routine, i.e. exercise, outing, regular meal time.</li><li>• Encourage someone with dementia to explore activities like stretching exercises, reminiscing over old photos and assisting with simple household chores.</li><li>• Limit daytime nap to 30 to 60 minutes only and avoid naps later in the day.</li><li>• Avoid caffeinated drinks (i.e. coffee/tea) preferably after 2pm for most people.</li><li>• Avoid being in the bedroom/lying on the bed when you are not sleeping.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create a comfortable sleep environment (i.e. your preferred temperature, not too bright/noisy).</li><li>• Go to bed only when you feel sleepy.</li><li>• Avoid working, watching TV or using phone in the bed (or within an hour before your bedtime) if it affects your sleep.</li><li>• Avoid large meals, caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime.</li><li>• Have a light snack before bedtime if you are feeling hungry.</li><li>• Limit water intake (i.e. preferably 2 hours before bedtime) and empty your bladder before going to bed.</li><li>• Avoid clock-watching if it stresses you and affects your sleep.</li></ul>

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for Insomnia

### **When is waking up during the night considered normal, and when might it indicate insomnia?**

Waking up briefly during the night is normal. In fact, we all wake up several times during the night, but most of the time, we do not remember it. However, if you find it difficult to fall back asleep or frequently wake up and stay awake for extended periods, it could be a sign of insomnia. Consulting a healthcare professional can help determine the underlying causes and treatment options.

### **Is it possible to effectively address insomnia while working a night shift schedule?**

Addressing insomnia while working night shifts is possible with tailored strategies, including adjusting sleep schedules and optimising sleep environments. Professional guidance from a healthcare provider or sleep specialist can be helpful in managing insomnia. Patience and consistency are crucial throughout the adjustment process.

Understanding insomnia and taking proactive steps to manage it is a significant step toward achieving a restful and refreshing sleep. Remember, it may take time to adjust and experience progress, so patience and persistence are key!

Contributed by Psychology (Allied Health Service), Nursing and Medical Psychiatry

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