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## Information About Insomnia

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Insomnia is not a disease; rather, it is a complex symptom that results from insufficient sleep or sleep of poor quality. However, insomnia is distinguishable from short sleep. Many people sleep less than 75% of conventional eight-hour sleep time and experience no difficulty sleeping or waking. Insomnia is the body's way of saying that something isn't right. Things that may cause insomnia include stress, too much caffeine, depression, jet lag, changes in work shifts, and pain from medical problems, such as arthritis. It's not really a serious problem for your health, but it can make you feel tired, depressed and irritable. It can also make it hard to concentrate during the day. More detailed information about medical causes of insomnia can be found at [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org).

Myths about sleep exacerbate anxiety about sleep and insomnia. The fear of insomnia often makes going to sleep more difficult and fills the nighttime hours with anxiety leaving people exhausted in the morning. One way to counter this anxiety is to examine underlying beliefs about sleep. The two following beliefs are common in our culture and lead to heightened anxiety about insomnia.

**“everyone should get eight hours of sleep”** – In reality different people need different amounts of sleep. Some people need nine or more hours while others need less than five. 20% of all people average less than 6 hours of sleep a night. The important thing is to find out how much sleep you need to feel rested throughout the day. Sleeping more than that may cause you to sleep more restlessly the following night.

**“most people sleep soundly through the night”** Waking up for short periods of time through out the night is the norm and becomes even more common with age. Anxiety about waking up and not being able to return to sleep is a common mechanism behind sleep maintenance insomnia. The best solution is to recognize that resting the body and mind at night, even if not fully asleep, will provide many of the same benefits as sleep itself.

## Healthy Sleeping Tips (sleep hygiene)

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Sleep hygiene refers to activities or practices that either promote sleep or hinder it. Many people with normal sleep habits have poor sleep hygiene, but it does not appear to affect them. People with insomnia, on the other hand, may be very susceptible to poor sleep hygiene. Good sleep hygiene practices include:

- **Maintain a regular bed and wake time schedule including weekends.**  
Our sleep-wake cycle is regulated by a “circadian clock” in our brain. A regular time for going to bed and getting up in the morning strengthens the circadian function and can help create sleepiness when it is time to go to bed at night. That is also why it is important to keep a regular bedtime and wake-time, even on the weekends when there is the temptation to sleep-in.
- **Eliminate nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, and other stimulants**  
This includes theophylline, beta agonists (usually as inhalers), and steroids, especially prior to bedtime. Nicotine and caffeine are stimulants that provoke arousal. The effects of caffeine can last for several hours, perhaps up to 24 hours, so the chances of it affecting sleep are significant. Caffeine may not only cause difficulty initiating sleep, but may also cause frequent awakenings. Alcohol may have a sedative effect for the first four hours following consumption, but it can then lead to frequent arousals and non-restful sleep.
- **Avoid napping**  
While napping seems like a proper way to catch up on missed sleep, it is not. Napping can be looked at as good sleep at a bad time. Typically, proper sleep hygiene practice involves establishing and maintaining a regular sleep pattern and training oneself to associate sleep with cues like darkness and a consistent bedtime. Napping may prove temporarily rewarding, but it diminishes the effects of long-term therapies.
- **Limit activities in bed**  
It is best to take work materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment. Use your bed only for sleep and sex to strengthen the association between bed and sleep. If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping, omit it from your bedtime routine. For example, if looking at a bedroom clock makes you anxious about how much time you have before you must get up, move the clock out of sight. Do not engage in activities that cause you anxiety and prevent you from sleeping.

- **Exercise**  
Regular exercise can promote sleep quality and duration. However, exercising immediately before bedtime can have a stimulant effect on the body and should be avoided within three hours of bedtime.
- **Avoid food and drink before bed**  
Eating a late dinner or snacking before going to bed activates the digestive system and can cause arousal, and so it should be avoided. Excessive drinking prior to bed can overwhelm the bladder, causing wakefulness and the need to use the restroom. Avoiding both liquids and food before bedtime can reduce the incidence difficult.
- **Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows.** Make sure your mattress is comfortable and supportive. The one you have been using for years may have exceeded its life expectancy – about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. Have comfortable pillows and make the room attractive and inviting for sleep but also free of allergens that might affect you and objects that might cause you to slip or fall if you have to get up during the night.
- **Create a sleep-conducive environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.** Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep – cool, quiet, dark, comfortable and free of interruptions. Also make your bedroom reflective of the value you place on sleep. Check your room for noise or other distractions, including a bed partner’s sleep disruptions such as snoring, light, and a dry or hot environment. Consider using blackout curtains, eye shades, ear plugs, “white noise,” humidifiers, fans and other devices.
- **Worry time**  
It can be very helpful to set aside a period of time at night to review the day and to make plans for the next day. The goal is to avoid doing these things while trying to fall asleep. It is also useful to make a list of, say, work-related tasks for the next day before leaving work.
- **Relaxation therapy**  
Relaxation techniques may consist of a variety of techniques, including progressive relaxation (perhaps with audio tapes), meditation, and biofeedback. The goal of all these interventions is to improve relaxation and relieve anxiety and arousal at bedtime. Calming the body often helps prepare it for sleep.

- **Bed Time Routine**

Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine such as soaking in a hot bath or hot tub and then reading a book or listening to soothing music. A relaxing, routine activity right before bedtime conducted away from bright lights helps separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress or anxiety which can make it more difficult to fall asleep, get sound and deep sleep, or remain asleep. Avoid arousing activities before bedtime like working, paying bills, engaging in competitive games or family problem-solving. Some studies suggest that soaking in hot water (such as a hot tub or bath) before retiring to bed can ease the transition into deeper sleep, but it should be done early enough that you are no longer sweating or over-heated. Finally, avoid exposure to bright before bedtime because it signals the neurons that help control the sleep-wake cycle that it is time to awaken, not to sleep.