

Sweet Dreams

SOUND ADVICE FOR SOUND SLEEP



Insomnia affects nearly 1 in 3 adults every year in the United States. The countless commercials touting sleep aids are a testament to how big of a problem getting to sleep or staying asleep has become for an estimated 60 million Americans.

"Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder in our society," confirms **Jacalyn Nelson, MD, a neurologist and sleep medicine specialist at the Dean/St. Mary's Sleep Center.** "What many people don't realize, though, is how very important sleep is to our *overall* health. We're just beginning to realize the tremendous impact sleep has on every aspect of our well-being, including bolstering the immune system, regulating metabolism, and helping to prevent chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure and diabetes."

While sleep medications can be helpful in certain situations like dealing with shift work, overcoming jet lag, or getting through a short-term highly-stressful life event, these medications can also cause unwanted side effects.

"It's my job to play sleep detective and find out the cause of your sleep problem," shares Dr. Nelson. "Sleep aids are often the last place I go."

Dr. Nelson offers the following ideas to manage insomnia or prevent a sleep problem from developing.



1. Create a healthy sleep environment. Does your partner snore or move around a lot? Is there too much light? You should sleep in a dark, cool room. If necessary, add some background "white noise" like the sound of a fan.



2. Stay on schedule. To help regulate your circadian rhythm (your internal body clock), it is very important to go to sleep and wake up every day at the same times, even on weekends.



3. Get enough sleep! "Sleep is highly undervalued in our society," claims Dr. Nelson. It's important

to give yourself eight hours of sleep each night. Continually stealing time from sleep to complete a hectic day can turn into a learned behavior that prevents you from falling asleep easily.



4. No napping. You might be tempted to make up for lost sleep, but napping can create a vicious cycle, making it difficult to fall asleep at bedtime. If you absolutely must nap, limit your snooze to an hour or less.



5. Don't use your bed as a living room. Watching TV, surfing the Internet, paying bills, and so many other tasks should not be done in bed. Finish them up before you hit the hay.



6. Diet and exercise have a time and place. First of all, obesity is a health problem that contributes to so many conditions, including sleep. If necessary, get help to achieve a healthy weight. Secondly, diet and exercise themselves can affect sleep depending on the time of day. For instance, you shouldn't have any alcohol or caffeine within 4-6 hours of bedtime. Likewise, do not engage in strenuous exercise late in the day because it acts as a stimulant in your body. Nicotine at any time of the day can be a problem, but it is particularly disruptive a few hours before bed or even during the night. And finally, don't go to bed starving. If you're focused on how hungry you are, you won't be able to fall asleep. A light snack before bed is O.K. In fact, the Old Wives' Tale about warm milk to help you sleep is absolutely true.



7. Check your daily medications with your doctor or pharmacist. Some common medications can have a stimulant effect. Get advice for how and when to take your meds to minimize impact on your sleep.



8. Don't worry. Or at least don't worry in bed. Try to deal with your stress before you go to sleep or you might end up lying in bed turning it over and over in your head. "Designate a worry time every day," recommends Dr. Nelson. "Write down your problem and any options you can think of. Sometimes, just getting it down on paper really helps." Dr. Nelson also suggests taking time to relax before bed, like listening to a book on tape or trying some breathing exercises.



9. Don't force it. Go to sleep when you're drowsy. "People with insomnia spend far too much time in bed," Dr. Nelson explains. If you can't sleep after 20 minutes, she recommends you get up and go into another room. Try again for sleep when you feel tired.



10. Don't ignore your symptoms. If your sleep problems persist for more than three weeks, talk to your doctor about seeing a sleep specialist. They can rule out other health problems, as well as address any sleep condition you may have. "It's much easier to deal with a sleep problem early on rather than after it has had a chance to develop for years," Dr. Nelson explains. Help is available.

If you would like more information about insomnia or any other sleep problem, visit

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