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# Insomnia

Sleep is as essential to us as food, air and water. Sometime in your life you may have difficulty sleeping - many people do – and sleep problems can be very common among young people. While it is not an illness and is in no way life-threatening, insomnia can be very distressing, frustrating, exhausting, depressing and at worst it can make you feel like you're going crazy.

## Common symptoms

If you ...

- are tired during the day
- have frequent headaches, are irritable or lack concentration
- are tired and not refreshed on waking
- sleep better away from home
- take longer than 30-40 minutes to fall asleep
- wake repeatedly during the night
- wake far too early and are unable to get back to sleep
- only get to sleep with the aid of sleeping pills or alcohol

... then you are probably suffering from insomnia.

## Main causes

Insomnia is a condition that is usually caused by something else! Sometimes it won't be immediately obvious what the causes are in your own case, but the following list might give clues:

- states of mind - anxiety, depression, worry, anger, grief, trauma
- change - moving house/city, starting university
- environment - noise, discomfort, time zone change
- pain (one of the commonest causes)
- medical conditions - heart, breathing, digestive problems, high blood pressure, arthritis, anorexia
- recreational use of drugs/alcohol
- sleeping pills and tranquillisers (can actually cause sleep disturbance)
- other prescription drugs - including some contraceptives, diuretics, slimming pills, beta-blockers, stimulants.

Causes of insomnia can be addressed.

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## Things you can do to help yourself

### *Change your environment*

You need a comfortable bed and a room that is quiet, and dark enough, with a comfortable temperature. Unfortunately this is not always possible. You might have noisy neighbours, a cold room, a partner who snores, furniture you have to make do with. But there are some things you can do that will help.

- Your bed - put a board under the mattress if it sags, or try putting your bed in a different position. Make sure your bedding is clean and that you are warm enough, but not too hot.
- Light - if light troubles you use thicker curtains or try putting a scarf or a sleep mask over your eyes. If you feel more comfortable with some light, leave the curtains open a little or use a night light.
- Noise - a common cause of sleeplessness. Use earplugs if it's noise you can't do anything about. Take some 'diplomatic action' e.g. talking to noisy neighbours. If noise from neighbours continues to be a serious problem, speak to college authorities or the local Environmental Health Officer.

### *Change your lifestyle*

If you are having difficulty sleeping and are keen to improve things it might be useful to adjust some aspects of your lifestyle. A good place to start is to cut out or cut down on any stimulants. These include: coffee and tea, alcohol, nicotine, caffeinated drinks, some food additives, 'junk food', slimming pills or appetite suppressants. Here are a number of other suggestions that are known to be helpful:

- exercise regularly
  - stay up until a reasonable bedtime even if you feel sleepy earlier
  - go to bed only when you are feeling really tired and sleepy
  - get up at the same time each day, even if you fell asleep late
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- if you're a late sleeper, force yourself to get up earlier
  - relax mentally and physically for an hour before bedtime
  - have a warm bath, do some yoga or take a light walk before turning in
  - make a list of the things on your mind then forget about them.

Some things to avoid:

- taking stimulants to keep you awake, or sedatives or alcohol to help you sleep
- sleeping during the day no matter how tired you are
- going to bed when you're stressed, wound up or not ready
- eating, drinking or smoking when you get up during the night
- worrying yourself into not sleeping
- getting angry with yourself if you can't sleep
- using computers, tablets and smart phones one hour before going to bed.

It's often the case that just adjusting things a little can make a tremendous difference.

### *Relaxation*

If you are stressed or anxious here are a few suggestions:

- change or resolve the things causing you stress when possible
- give yourself enough time to do the things you need to do
- don't take on too much and avoid unrealistic demands
- give yourself some 'quiet time' each day
- practise a relaxation technique, mindfulness or breathing exercises
- have some down time before going to bed - you need time to unwind.

### *Sleeping pills*

If you are wondering about taking medication to help you sleep, speak to your GP. It is also advisable to consult your GP if you are already taking medication and are concerned about the side-effects, or are thinking of stopping.

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## *Alcohol and sleep*

Alcohol is often more disruptive to sleep than caffeine. Your body will produce adrenaline to compensate for the alcohol in your system. Alcohol also makes you thirsty and disrupts your blood sugar levels, which can cause you to sleep fitfully or to wake. You don't have to give up alcohol altogether but in the interests of solving the problem of sleeplessness and establishing a healthy sleeping pattern, why not think about cutting down - perhaps by not drinking late at night or by deciding to have a number of alcohol-free days a week.

If you are concerned about the amount you are drinking or think you might have an alcohol problem, speak to your GP, a college nurse or a counsellor.

## **Getting additional help**

There are a number of people who can help you - a college nurse, your GP or a counsellor here at the University Counselling Service. You needn't feel bad about having to ask for help - insomnia is not a trivial matter. It can be debilitating. Professional help and encouragement may be just what you need.

## **Useful resources**

You can find self-help information on a range of issues on the University Counselling Service website: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp)

Tel: 01223 332865  
Fax: 01223 760990  
Email: [counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk](mailto:counsellingreception@admin.cam.ac.uk)  
Web: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk>