

Simple Sleep Solutions

by Dr Shanti B. Rangwani

Insomnia is one of the most disturbing products of our modern lifestyles in which mental tensions abound. Normally 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night is adequate for most people. Many, however, do equally well with 4 to 5 hours of deep sleep. The requirement of sleep also diminishes with age, which is why many old people often complain of not getting enough sleep whereas they are in fact getting their normal biological quota.

The contrast in sleep requirements becomes clear when one realises that the former American president Calvin Coolidge slept 11 hours out of 24 whereas in contrast Indira Gandhi slept only four hours. Napoleon Bonaparte was said to sleep for only three hours everyday, as did Thomas Edison, who is said to have invented the light bulb so that man didn't have to waste a third of his life sleeping!

But there is no denying that sleep impairment seriously affects our performance. Laboratory rats prevented from sleeping die within a week. And new research shows that the lack of sleep not only makes us irritable and devoid of humour, but also makes us perform effectively only for shorter and shorter periods. After long hours of sleeplessness, we start to hear and see strange things and tend to behave in a paranoid way.

The symptoms of pathological insomnia include deterioration in the duration and quality of sleep, persistent changes in sleep patterns, memory lapses, trouble concentrating, emotional instability, loss of coordination, and a lingering feeling of lethargy.

The most common cause of insomnia is undoubtedly mental tension. It is also caused by overwork, over-excitement, constipation, dyspepsia, excessive intake of tea and coffee, going to bed hungry, overeating, harbouring negative feelings like resentment and anger. But more often than not I find that insomnia is at its most acute in people who dread it the most. In other words, they worry because they cannot sleep and they cannot sleep because they worry!

Sleep is basically an evolutionary requirement. With a 24 hour rotating earth, human beings have evolved to perform actively with the help of adrenalin and steroids produced in the day and to recharge at night when growth hormones rebuild our tattered tissues. The maximum benefit comes from the first 4 to 5 hours after which the benefits obtained decrease quickly. Therefore in terms of physical rest to the body, a five-hour sleep may be almost as beneficial as a ten-hour sleep. This would also seem to explain the value of short catnaps and siestas, so popular in hot countries like India where the climate has a tendency to sap ones' energies, especially in the summer months.

If you miss your normal quota at night, remember you can always make it up in the afternoon or by the next night. What you need to do most is eliminate worry and

stress, not just regarding your lack of sleep, but also with regard to your life, perhaps even rethink your attitude towards how you handle problems and people. Cultivate the art of doing things slowly, enjoying the process itself. Merely worrying about insomnia is one of the guaranteed ways not to get sleep, and it will hurt you far more than the insomnia itself. Dale Carnegie had a lovely strategy for the problem of insomnia: "Go to bed at nights, and if you can't fall asleep, forget all about it. Just say to yourself over and over again, I don't give a damn if I don't go to sleep. It's all right with me if I lie awake till morning. Close your eyes and say, 'As long as I just lie still and don't worry about it, I'll be getting rest anyway.'"

It is important for people who suffer from insomnia to understand just what is wrong with one of the commonest remedies for insomnia - sleeping tablets. Research shows that they produce unhealthy sleep by altering the normal sleep rhythm and this reduces the hormonal recharging. Even the mildest of sleeping tablets have been known to cause sedation the next day.

Sleeping pills can be justified only for short periods, such as temporary change in lifestyle or to break the pattern of a long term sleep problem. Not only are they habit forming, but they are required to be taken in higher doses as time goes by. Side effects of many of the so-called 'sleeping tablets' include indigestion, skin rashes, lowered resistance to infection, circulatory and respiratory problems, poor appetite, high blood pressure, kidney and liver problems, and further mental confusion. People on the sleeping pill invariably exhibit the vegetative symptoms so characteristic of their lot. These include the impression of physical exhaustion throughout the day, irritability, and a woeful lack of pleasure and initiative in planning their lives.

To overcome the problems it is important to develop an attitude whereby you continually remind yourself that the fact that you are not getting any sleep tonight is not something you should worry about since you can easily make it up tomorrow. It is also important, however, to adhere to a regular, scheduled routine of diet and sleep.

* All rich, heavy foods have to be eschewed. Exclude white flour products, sugar, tea, coffee, chocolate, cold drinks, alcohol, fried and fatty foods, and the excessive use of salt. Avoid late dinners; go to bed at a fixed time each night, and try to sleep preferably before midnight.

* New research shows that people with chronic insomnia invariably have marked deficiencies of key nutrients such as Vitamin B-Complex, Vitamin C, Vitamin D, and also calcium, magnesium, potassium and zinc. It is not known whether this is the cause or effect of insomnia, nevertheless it makes great sense for insomniacs to plan their diet so as to include foods rich in these nutrients if they are to avoid the other more serious ailments which are sure to follow.

* It is also important to take only easily to take only easily digestible food, since indigestion is one of the commonest causes of insomnia. Avoid what in your experience are gas-forming foods. Avoid a diet of stimulants and condiments.

* As regards naturopathic diet remedies, a glass of mixed carrot and spinach juice every morning helps balance the nervous system. Eating lettuce and taking lettuce juice is also of tremendous help in insomnia. Lettuce contains a sleep inducing substance called lactucarium which effectively likens lettuce juice to the sedative action of opium without the accompanying excitement. The seeds of lettuce, taken in a decocted form, are also useful in this regard.

* For young children, a tablespoon of honey taken with some water before going to sleep has an excellent soporific effect.

* Important Ayurvedic herbs for curing insomnia are gotu kola, nutmeg, jatamansi, valerian and ashwagandha. A good medicine can be made at home by mixing 2 parts ashwagandha, 2 parts valerian, 1 part nutmeg and 1 part licorice. For chronic insomnia, take 5 gm. of this powder with a little warm water just before going to bed.

* People who worry about insomnia usually sleep for far more time than they either realise or care to admit. The man who swears, "I didn't sleep a wink last night" may have slept for hours without knowing it. All they have really done is talked themselves into a case of insomnia, a potentially dangerous approach. The way to undo the damage caused by such an attitude is to virtually dehypnotise yourself by indulging in a reversed form of auto-suggestion. You can do this best by saying to the muscles of your body, let go, let go - loosen up and relax. It is impossible for the mind and the nerves to relax without the muscles. So if you want to get to sleep quickly, you start with the muscles, to get them into a relaxed, limp state. Hydrotherapy is excellent in this regard. Application of hot packs to the spine, or an alternate hot/cold foot bath at bedtime relax the stressed body. Massage the feet and wrap them in cold pack for 15 minutes after the foot bath. A simple hot bath 15 minutes before bedtime also produces a feeling of blissful lethargy.

* Exercise daily. If we get tired enough by exercising, say, by taking a long walk after dinner, nature will force us to sleep even while we are walking! Regular active exercise during the day also helps since it stimulates the elimination of lactic acid from the body. Incidentally, the presence of lactic acid correlates with stress and muscular tension. Regular exercise also produces hormonal changes which are beneficial to the body and which fortify the sleep pattern. Vigorous exercise should however be eschewed since this can stimulate the system instead.

* Controlled deep-breathing is also excellent for getting sleep. Try to make a rhythmic pattern of breathing as you lie in bed. This will get your mind off the problem of insomnia itself and coax the body into the subdued rhythm of good sleep. A glass of hot water taken before going to bed, and relaxation techniques such as yoga nidra and meditation at bedtime also relax you mentally and physically. But more important than anything else, take it easy and do not force yourself to sleep.