



UNDERSTANDING INSOMNIA

Insomnia is a common problem. For some people it only lasts a few days but for others, it can go on for months to years. For people with chronic insomnia, your actions can help to improve your symptoms. You may find the following helpful to better understand your insomnia and what you can do to improve your symptoms.

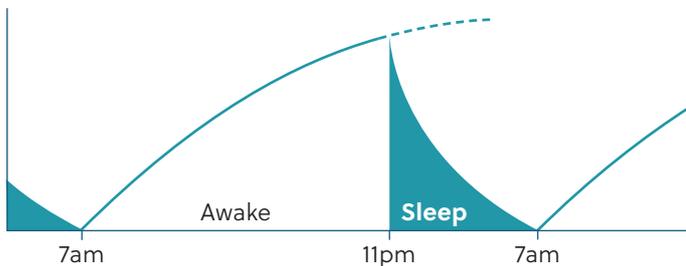
UNDERSTANDING HOW SLEEP WORKS

There are 2 main things that control your sleep:

1. The sleep drive and
2. The body sleep clock (circadian rhythm)

Sleep Drive

- Sleep drive is a measure of your need for sleep. It is influenced by how long it has been since you last slept plus how good the quality of that sleep was.
- The longer it has been since you slept, the higher your sleep drive.



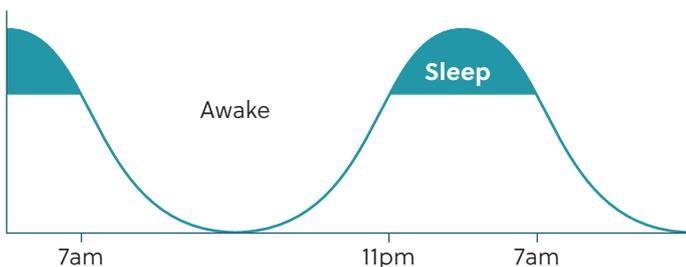
Body Sleep Clock (Circadian Rhythm)

- You may have heard the term "circadian rhythm". The circadian system is a complex system that includes several hormones that control your body's sleep clock. The main hormone that controls your body clock is **melatonin**.
- Melatonin is affected by sunlight during the day and darkness at night.

It is important that enough time passes since the last time you slept for the sleep drive to increase to its highest so that your body will be ready to fall asleep. However, that time should also coincide with the time when your **sleep clock** has hormonal balance with increased **melatonin** levels, giving your brain the cues that your body is ready for sleep.

This means that sleep is best when your sleep drive and circadian rhythm are both aligned, which should naturally occur at night-time.

The graph below shows the two different systems. As the day increases, our **sleep drive** increases, and our **sleep clock** is also increasing. As a result of these two systems working together, our brain is primed and ready for sleep.



SLEEP HABITS

For people with chronic insomnia, your actions can change your insomnia symptoms far more effectively than any medication can. If you have insomnia you may have noticed that your sleep habits have changed in a way that makes your sleeping problems worse. Identifying those habits is important to help improve your sleep.

Here are some examples of poor sleep habits:

- Spending more time in bed than the normal 7 – 9 hours required for healthy sleep.
- You try to switch from mentally or physically stimulating activities over to sleep too quickly, without giving your brain a chance to 'calm down' before going to sleep.
- You give your brain too much stimulation from devices before bed.
- Eating your dinner or drinking caffeine too late in the day.
- You don't move enough during the day so you're not physically tired at bedtime.
- Sleeping in the day and are then more awake at night.
- Taking naps that are too long.
- You do not have a regular time to wake up and a regular time to go to sleep.

What are your sleep habits?

Learning more about your sleep patterns can help you make a plan to address your sleep problems. A **sleep diary** is a good way of helping to better appreciate what your sleep habits are. A sleep diary monitors your sleep schedule over a two-week period and includes what time you go to bed, how long it takes you to fall asleep, whether you wake overnight and what time you get up each day.

Sleep Diary

A sleep diary gives you a snapshot view of your sleep and sleep habits over a two-week period. You should fill it out each morning while the information is still fresh in your memory. Don't rely on electronic devices to fill out your sleep diary, we are more interested in your subjective experience rather than what your device is telling you. You can keep the diary and bring it with you to your next appointment or when you see your sleep psychologist so we can use it to help make your care plan.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP NATURALLY

1. CREATING A GOOD SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

- **Bedroom:** Your room should be dark, quiet and at a comfortable temperature. Pets should be out of the room if possible.
- **TV:** It is best to keep the TV out of the bedroom if possible. If you do have a TV in your bedroom, it should be turned off before you try to sleep.
- **Phone:** If you have a phone, turn it off while you try to sleep or at least put it on silent.
- **Screen-free:** Do not use your smartphone, tablet or computer in bed.
- **Only use your bedroom for sleep and sex:** This will help your brain associate the bedroom as a place where sleep takes place.

2. FOCUS ON YOUR DAYTIME & BEDTIME HABITS

- **Caffeine:** Avoid caffeine in the afternoon and evening. Caffeine is in coffee, tea, some soft drinks, and chocolate. Generally, there is more caffeine in coffee and energy drinks than tea or chocolate. But some people are very sensitive to even small amounts of caffeine.
- **Nicotine:** If you suffer from nicotine addiction, try not use nicotine near bedtime or during the time you would like to be sleeping. Nicotine acts as a stimulant for the brain and can result in difficulty falling asleep.
- **Alcohol:** Avoid alcohol near bedtime. While alcohol can make you feel sleepy, it tends to disrupt your sleep and results in poor sleep quality.
- **Meals:** Avoid heavy meals close to bedtime. If you are hungry to the point that you can't sleep as a result, have a light snack.

3. IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP CYCLE

- **Naps:** While we are trying to improve your sleep and break your cycle of insomnia, you should try to avoid napping as much as possible. If you find that you need to nap because you are too sleepy, set an alarm so that you only sleep for 15 to 30 minutes. Try not to make napping a regular habit.
- **Have a regular sleep schedule:** Maintain a regular time going to bed and a regular time getting up 7 days per week. This means getting up at the same time on your days off that you would get up when you are working.
- **Unwind for an hour before bedtime:** Allow your body and your brain a chance to unwind for an hour before bed. Develop a regular ritual to help you wind down and relax such as taking a shower or reading a book. Avoid chores and work if they are likely to keep you more awake and alert. Your wind down time should not be in your bedroom.
- **Only go to bed when you are sleepy:** You are more likely to fall asleep if you are sleepy. If you are feeling wide awake and alert, then engage in calming and relaxing activities until you do feel sleepy, and then go to bed.
- **Get out of bed when not sleepy:** If you have been in bed trying to sleep for more than **20 minutes** without falling asleep or falling back asleep, you should get out of the bed and go to another room. During this time, you should choose quiet activities that help to distract you from thinking about sleep such as reading, doing puzzles, or crafts. Avoid switching on overhead lights or using electronic devices and try use as little light as possible. Too much light exposure, even from the screen of your phone, will disrupt your circadian rhythm and make it more difficult for you to sleep.

THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU ARE NOT SLEEPY

The following list of activities are some things you could consider doing when you are not sleepy. You might have other activities that you can think of that you could do which would keep you occupied and help to keep your attention off the fact that you are not sleeping. Focussing on the fact that you are not sleeping tends to just make the problem worse. The aim with each of these activities is to keep your brain gently occupied and your attention off your insomnia.

READING

- Choose something that you can stop reading without becoming too absorbed by when you feel tired. This could be a magazine, short story, or a textbook.

CRAFTS / ART

- Sewing can keep your hands busy, yet be easy to put down when you feel sleepy. You may have other crafts that you like such as knitting, crochet, or cross-stitch.
- Colouring books can be relaxing for some people.

PUZZLES

- Consider crossword puzzles, a jigsaw puzzle or other games that help take your mind off sleeping. Ideally, choose something that isn't too mentally stimulating for you. The goal here is to keep you occupied and distracted so you are not focussing on your sleep.

MAKE A LIST

- If your mind is active worrying about everything you have to do the next day, write them down to help your brain relax and put the list "to bed".

RELAXATION METHODS

Focussing on your breathing is a good way to help calm down a racing mind. Focus your attention on using your diaphragm to control your breath.

- Breathe in deeply through your nose and slowly count to 4, then
- Slowly breathe out through your nose while you count to 4.

Try doing this for five minutes. It may take practice to develop this skill. Feel your stomach rise and fall as you slowly breathe in and out. You may want to rest your hand on your belly to help you focus.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is another technique that helps you focus on something other than your sleep and can be quite relaxing.

Starting with your toes, try to tighten and then relax each of your muscles as you progressively work your way up from your toes to the top of your head.

Don't forget there the small muscles in your hands and feet, as well as your face. Tighten and relax each muscle on one side of the body, then shift your attention to the other side of your body.

There are other resources that can help you learn to relax including books and recordings. **Smiling Mind** is a free app available for download to your phone which includes a guided Progressive Muscle Relaxation which you might like to incorporate into your nightly sleep ritual.

CHANGING YOUR SLEEP PATTERN

Changing your sleep patterns takes time and effort. There are certain rules to begin with which might seem counter-intuitive or hard to follow, but which, if followed, will help you improve your sleep patterns.

1. SPEND LESS TIME IN BED

This is the most important rule to help you reset your sleep pattern. When you spend less time in bed, you end up reducing the amount of time that you are in bed not sleeping and you improve your sleep efficiency, that is, the percentage of time in bed spent asleep vs time in bed awake. We can use your sleep diary to help work out how much time you should be spending in bed overall. You should spend at least 6 hours in bed each night. As your sleep improves, we can progressively add a little more sleep to your schedule each night, but usually no more than 15 minutes.

2. GET UP AT THE SAME TIME OF DAY EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK.

To optimise your sleep drive at night, we want you to get up at the same time each day to reset your body clock. Get up at the same time each morning, even if you have had a bad nights sleep. Try getting up at the same time on days when you are not working too. If you do need to have a sleep in, make sure that you don't sleep for more than one hour later compared to days when you are working.

3. GET BRIGHT LIGHT EXPOSURE IN THE MORNING.

Going outside and getting sunlight exposure is important for resetting your body clock each day. Sunlight exposure **within 90 minutes of waking** will help reset your body clock for the day. Ideally you should aim to spend at least 30 minutes outside each morning. Going for a walk or eating breakfast outside can be a great way to increase your light exposure each day. Sunlight exposure more than 90 minutes after waking is much less effective. Sunlight has a much greater impact on your body clock than artificial light and windows block out many of the frequencies of light that are needed to reset your body clock.

4. DON'T GO TO BED UNLESS YOU ARE SLEEPY.

Some people go to bed because their partner is going to bed or because they think that they 'should'. But it is best to listen to your body and learn to recognise when you are sleepy. By having a wind down period before bed, you can learn to recognise the cues that your body is sending you to tell you that your brain is ready for sleep. You may not be sleepy at the time you normally go to bed, and if this is the case, stay awake and out of the bedroom until you feel sleepy.

- You might like to review the suggestions of things to do when you are not sleepy. These activities can help you "unwind" and prepare your body and brain for sleep.
- Avoid exercise or excessive physical activity within 4 hours of your planned sleep period. Heavy exercise releases hormones which can overly stimulate the brain and make it harder for you to fall asleep.
- Where possible, try avoid too much emotional stress during your wind down period.

5. DON'T STAY IN BED UNLESS YOU ARE ASLEEP.

If you do not fall asleep within 20 minutes of going to bed, get out of bed and go into another room. Engage in an activity that helps you pass the time without worrying about your difficulty sleeping.

- You might like to review the suggestions of things to do when you are not sleepy.
- Have an action plan prepared. Plan in advance where you are going to go in your home when you are not sleepy. If you are not able to sleep, follow your plan and go to another room as planned until you are feeling sleepy.

6. DON'T WATCH THE CLOCK!

If you have a bedside clock, turn it to face the wall. Avoid watching the clock as it will only add to your stress and anxiety, making it harder to fall asleep. When you are filling out your sleep diary, estimate what time and for how long you think that you have woken overnight. If you have a bad nights sleep, it isn't the end of the world. Remind yourself that you have had bad nights previously and still been able to function.

7. STOP CALLING YOURSELF AN INSOMNIAC

We all have trouble sleeping from time to time. When we tell ourselves that we are 'insomniacs' or 'bad sleepers', it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Remind yourself that sleep is a normal and natural process and that **you can sleep**, but that you are not sleeping as well as you would like to *at the moment*. Tomorrow is another day and you will try and get a better sleep tomorrow night. Also, remind yourself that you are doing something about your sleeping difficulties, and congratulate yourself on your efforts so far.

