

## What Is Insomnia?

Many people think the term “insomnia” refers to a complete lack of sleep. In truth, insomnia encompasses a host of sleep problems, including:

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Waking up in the middle of the night
- Early morning awakening
- Non-restful sleep

## Don't Be a Hero: The Negative Effects of Insomnia

Ever heard someone brag that he or she only needs six hours of sleep? While it's admirable to try to put a positive spin on a negative situation, taking a heroic attitude toward sleeplessness can be bad for your health. Most people need between seven and nine hours of sleep. Getting insufficient sleep can:

- Cause fatigue, irritability, and excessive daytime sleepiness
- Cause weight gain and make it difficult to lose weight
- Weaken the immune system, making you more susceptible to getting sick
- Cause elevated blood pressure and can increase the risk of diabetes and heart disease
- Contribute to chronic pain
- Exacerbate mental illness, including depression and anxiety
- Reduce focus and concentration, leading to decreased performance at work
- Decrease motor function, making driving hazardous

## Techniques for Relieving Insomnia without Medication

Meds can be good for some things. And certainly some [natural or herbal sleep products](#) may help you get some rest. But prescription pills for sleeping aren't always the best solution.

Unfortunately, some sleep medications can actually make the problem worse. Sleep aids frequently disrupt sleep cycles, causing less restorative sleep. Even if they help you sleep through the night, the sleep is not necessarily deep or restful. People can become dependent on these meds, requiring them to sleep, and many develop a tolerance to sleep meds over time, requiring more medication to get the same effect. These meds can also cause rebound insomnia, meaning it becomes even harder to fall asleep without the medication. So before you pop that pill for your sleep problems, try these methods instead: 1. Sleep Hygiene 2. Brief Cognitive Behavioral Treatment Intervention for Insomnia (also called “CBT-I”) What Is Sleep Hygiene?

Sleep hygiene is a collection of habits that can help you fall asleep more easily and sleep more deeply. You can develop good sleep hygiene on your own. Try following our [7 Habits of Highly Successful Sleepers](#) and this list of do's and don'ts.

## Sleep Hygiene: Do's & Don'ts

### The Do's:

- Stick to a regular sleep schedule (same bedtime and wake-up time), seven days a week.
- Exercise at least 30 minutes per day most days of the week. Restrict vigorous exercise to the morning or afternoon. More relaxing exercise, like these [yoga poses to help you sleep](#), can be done before bed.
- Get plenty of natural light exposure during the day. Open your blinds first thing in the morning and get outside during the day. You can even try using a light box first thing in the morning during dark winter days to help your brain wake up and regulate your body's rhythms.
- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine.
- Take a warm bath or shower before bed.
- Do relaxation exercises before bed, including [mindful breathing](#) and progressive muscle relaxation.
- Make sure your [sleep environment](#) is pleasant and relaxing. Your bed should be comfortable, and your room shouldn't be too hot, too cold, or too bright. If necessary, use earplugs and an eyemask. Be sure your [pillow](#) is comfortable.
- Associate your bed with sleep and sex only. Don't work, eat or watch TV in bed.
- Go to bed when sleepy, and get out of bed if you're tossing and turning.
- Turn your clock around so you can't see the time.
- Turn off the alert for texts and emails on your phone.
- Keep a "worry journal." If something's on your mind as you're trying to fall asleep, write it down on a pad of paper so you can revisit it the next day.
- If you're unable to fall asleep after about 20 minutes, leave bed and do something relaxing (like reading); return to bed later.
- Download free screen-dimming software for your computer. Two popular programs are [f.lux](#) and [Dimmer](#). These nifty programs help you avoid the stimulation of bright light if you're using your computer late at night. Better yet: Put the computer away an hour before bedtime!

## The Don'ts:

- Don't ingest caffeine after noon. This includes coffee, tea, iced tea, energy drinks and soda.
- Don't have that second glass of wine with dinner. While alcohol is known to speed the onset of sleep, it also disrupts sleep—especially causing arousal during the second half of the night, when the body should be entering deep sleep.
- Don't take other stimulants close to bedtime, including chocolate, nicotine and certain medications.
- Don't eat a large, heavy meal close to bedtime.
- Don't watch TV, use the computer or spend long periods on a mobile device before bed. These activities stimulate the brain and make it harder to fall asleep.
- Don't use your phone, laptop, or other mobile device in bed.
- Don't give in to the urge to nap during the day; it can disturb the normal sleep/wakefulness pattern.

## If Sleep Hygiene Isn't Enough

Sleep hygiene alone is often enough to get you sleeping better. The tricky part is maintaining your good sleep habits—it can be hard to have the self-discipline to stick with good sleep hygiene.

If you've diligently applied good sleep habits and still find you're not sleeping well on a regular basis, it might be time to think about Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia, or CBT-I. Stay tuned for more information in our next installment on insomnia.