

Insomnia – the thief of the night

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A Science of Medicine
The Art of Care

Insomnia is a common disorder which has a marked negative effect on a person's quality of life. It is also an ailment over which the person affected can exert a considerable beneficial influence by making changes to personal lifestyle, habits and immediate environment.

Insomnia can wreck our quality of life. Most of us have trouble sleeping every now and then. But if the problem lingers night after night, if we lie awake for hours before nodding off, or wake up too often or too early, then insomnia

may be the culprit. It is not unusual; insomnia is the most common sleep disorder.

Insomnia is not a trivial disorder. We wake up, day in, day out, unrefreshed, often very irritable, and low in physical energy and mental vitality. It invariably leads quickly to poor focus and performance at work, and slower reaction

time, for example when driving. It increases the risk of depression and anxiety, developing high blood pressure, heart disease and even type 2 diabetes. It is also associated with increased body weight. The immune system, a major agent of Physis, can also be affected with time.

This, of course, is not surprising. Good quality sleep is an absolute necessity for sound health, and has been duly recognised by Tibb as one of the most important Lifestyle Factors. Sleep not only restores inner harmony to the body, but allows Physis protected time in which to remove natural waste products and artificial toxins from the body and brain, and so restore harmony within.

There is no shortage of factors which contribute to insomnia. Mental disharmony, whether from stress, anxiety or depression, is a common one. Physical ailments like indigestion, constipation, urinary problems, chronic pain (from arthritis or after surgery, for example), and an over-active thyroid are often present in tandem with insomnia. However most cases are probably due to poor sleep hygiene. Mental over-stimulation before

Insomnia:

- Occurs at any age, but is more common in the elderly
- Can be acute (<3 weeks) or chronic (>3-4 weeks)
- Is common in people working irregular hours
- Is common if travelling through different time zones

Insomnia often goes with:

- Chronic pain, from arthritis, cancer, post surgery
- Stroke, Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's
- Breathing disorders, such as asthma and emphysema
- Heart failure, which causes breathing problems
- Thyroid problems, which cause palpitations
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Pregnancy, especially in later stages
- Life events – bereavement, financial/work stress, etc

bedtime, poor quality bed and bedding, noisy or too-light a bedroom, unwise eating or drinking too close to bedtime, often bring on insomnia. Certain medications are also guilty of causing insomnia, especially stimulants and certain antidepressants and cough-cold remedies.

Tibb has a definite perspective on insomnia. It considers the key activity of nerve tissue and the impulses generated to be linked to the quality of *moistness*. Insomnia, however, is more associated with the direct opposite, namely excess of the quality of *dryness*. It follows, therefore, that any environmental, dietary, emotional or behavioural feature which generates dryness in us may result in insomnia. Tibb also asserts that those of us with the quality of dryness as part of our temperament will be more prone to insomnia; specifically people with a melancholic and bilious disposition.

Knowing the source of insomnia points the way to dealing with it. Those of us who are affected should consume

Sleep Hygiene Factors

- Go to bed only when sleepy
- If sleep is elusive, get up and, e.g. read, until drowsy
- Keep a regular, same time, sleep-wake cycle
- Arise at the same time each morning
- Arrange a quiet, dark, not-too-hot bedroom
- Empty bladder before retiring for the night
- Have a hot bath 1 to 2 hours before bedtime
- Avoid cat-napping in late afternoon
- Resist using electronic devices

more foods which have a predominant quality, such as banana, butternut and sweet potato. We should also consume less of foods which are predominantly dry, such as red meats, tomato, beans and onions.

However, the area in which the insomnia sufferer can have the greatest effect is probably in improving sleep hygiene. Making sure the bedroom is conducive to good sleep is a priority. (See box opposite).

Simple measures will often benefit those of us with insomnia:

- Check that any conventional medication being taken regularly is not interfering with sleep – such as nasal decongestants and blood pressure lowering drugs.
- Try to sort out any existing mental tensions – otherwise the sufferer will probably wake up sore and unrefreshed. Meditation may help here.
- Avoid physical exercise close to bedtime – late afternoon, early evening is best.
- Set time aside for Tibb breathing exercises – these induce physical and mental relaxation.
- Try adding herbal essences to the bathwater – lavender, chamomile, for example.
- Eat a light tryptophan-rich snack (bananas, figs, dates) an hour or so before going to bed.
- Chamomile tea or hot milk enriched with honey and nutmeg often brings about good sleep.
- Refrain from smoking or taking caffeine- or alcohol-rich drinks immediately before bedtime.
- Restrict TV viewing and computer-related activities before bedtime.

Insomnia:

The naturally occurring stimulant tyramine is likely involved – so avoid foods which contain it: bacon, sausages, cheese, chocolate, tomatoes and wine, especially late in the day.

Insomnia sufferers often turn to drugs. However, these sedatives or hypnotic drugs are usually no more effective than non-drug methods, and will probably have longer lasting effects. The ones available over-the-counter are usually older-form antihistamines, which have sedation as a side effect. Others, especially the benzodiazepines and

'Z' drugs, can lead to physical dependence, especially if used for longer periods than recommended, and this appears as withdrawal symptoms if the drug is discontinued.

Summary. Most people are aware of standard advice about dispelling insomnia – get to bed and arise at regular times, make the bed-room 'sleep friendly' unwind physically and mentally before retiring, etc. As quality sleep is essential for good health, ways of achieving it are very important. There are many causes, and therefore many different approaches to dealing with sleep problems, without resorting to synthetic drugs. Tibb has long recognised the huge importance of sleep in the health-illness scenario, and offers a wide range of practical advice to deal with it.

For further information:

- The Tibb approach to insomnia. www.tibb.co.za/images/Traditional_Roots_of_Medicine.pdf (page 151)
- Temperament – www.tibb.co.za/concepts_tibb.html
- Physis – www.tibb.co.za/concepts_tibb.html
- Diet charts: “*Cooking for your Body Type*” – www.tibb.co.za/Cookbook.pdf
- Tibb herbal products – www.tibbherbals.com/
- Insomnia (general). <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insomnia>