



Insomnia

What is insomnia?

A good night's sleep is one of the most refreshing things we can experience, but many people find that it is all too elusive. Insomnia is defined as difficulty getting to sleep, or staying asleep long enough to feel refreshed, in the absence of external factors (such as children!) waking you up. Insomnia can be acute (lasting a short time) but often becomes chronic, affecting people several nights a week over long periods of time. Insomnia is a common problem, affecting more women than men.

What causes insomnia?

There are many different causes for poor sleep, but often it's the way we approach sleep that is the problem. Your brain does not just switch on and off: you need time to wind down and transition into sleep. Activities and distractions that keep your brain awake can make this more difficult. Your brain also has a natural 'sleep-wake' cycle that tells it roughly when to sleep. If your lifestyle or work disrupts this, it means you are trying to sleep when your brain thinks you need to be awake – and this can cause problems.

Once people find themselves unable to fall asleep, anxiety and frustration can rapidly make things worse. We cannot make ourselves fall asleep, but we can quickly make ourselves unable to fall asleep! Treatments, therefore, often target our thought patterns and emotional response to insomnia as much as the initial triggers.

Can it be treated?

The most effective treatments for insomnia look at developing good sleeping habits. Establishing a regular waking time, no matter what time you went to sleep, or whether it is a weekday or the weekend, helps to regulate the sleep-wake cycle. So does a regular winding-down routine before bed. Improving sleep hygiene is also often helpful. This is nothing to do with how clean you are, but working on promoting good sleep by ensuring the bedroom is calm, quiet, not too light etc, and removing distractions and obstacles to sleep, such as mobile phones or TVs.

Aside from such practical suggestions, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been demonstrated to be extremely effective in reducing insomnia, with one study finding nearly 3/4 sufferers saw an improvement after just one session.



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What about sleeping tablets?

Chemical means of getting off to sleep, like sleeping tablets, mean that we do not sleep properly, so we don't wake up feeling refreshed. Some sleeping tablets also have a 'hangover' effect in the morning. Some people use them for shifts or jet lag, but it is not a good habit to get into regularly: sleeping tablets are only prescribed in most cases for a maximum of two weeks. They are not a long-term solution – ultimately we need to learn how to get a natural night's sleep.

Top tips for sleeping well

- **Keep the bedroom for sleeping.** It is for two things only – sleep and sex! Using it for things like working, watching TV or arguing will make it harder for you to get to sleep later. If you wake up for more than 20 minutes, or can't go to sleep within 20 minutes, get up and go to another room. This is so your mind still associates the bed with sleeping rather than with being awake. Don't pick up your phone or iPad, watch TV or do anything that over-stimulates your brain. Try reading a book, or perhaps have a milky drink (though avoid those containing caffeine!). When you feel sleepy, go to back to bed. If you don't sleep within 20 minutes, repeat this process until you do.
- **Avoid sleeping in the day** if you can – even catnaps – as it further disrupts your sleep-wake cycle.
- **Avoid caffeine after lunchtime.** Caffeine has a long half-life and individuals vary in how quickly their body removes it from their system. Avoid using it as a way of staying awake. Nicotine (cigarettes, gum and chewing tobacco) can also affect sleep as this acts on the same receptors in the brain.
- **Avoid alcohol.** Although alcohol can relax you a bit, for most people it is something of a stimulant and actually raises your heart rate. It also affects the quality of your sleep, making you more likely to wake in the night.
- **If you have babies in the house** this is the time to do whatever it takes to teach them to sleep well. Seek some advice and make this a priority: this is not just about your need to sleep. Teach your children to sleep well and you can protect them from a lifetime of insomnia.

What about faith?

There are several examples in the Bible where people struggle to sleep: see Genesis 31:40 or Daniel 6:18. Psalm 56 is a great encouragement, reminding us that no matter how alone we feel in the darkness hours,



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God is with us: 'You've kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless nights. Each tear entered in your ledger, every ache written in your book' (v8).

Sometimes God pulls us into wakefulness as he calls us to prayer. In Psalm 77 the writer, in the midst of a difficult time, describes evocatively how God keeps his eyes from closing as he reaches out and prays in his anguish.

If you're unsure what to read when you are awake, why not spend some time reading a Christian book or prayer resource (Psalm 119:148)? But don't look at prayer websites or apps, as the screen will be too bright and may prevent you drifting into sleep. Instead of being frustrated, it's good to use the time to pray.

⇒ Helpful links:

For more about insomnia, check out the NHS website:

⇒ www.sleepfoundation.org/insomnia/home

You can also find out more on the National Sleep Foundation website:

⇒ www.sleepfoundation.org

This book uses a CBT approach to deal with insomnia:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/overcoming-insomnia-book>

Or check out this audio advice from Prof Chris Williams on how to sleep better:

⇒ www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/sleep-problems-podcast.aspx

More sleep vicar? One pastor's journey to better sleep:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/more-sleep-vicar>

Sleep and the Bible – read more on what the Bible can teach us about those times when sleep just won't come:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/when-sleep-wont-come>

A study by Northumbria University found nearly 3/4 sufferers saw an improvement after just one therapy session:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/northumbria-university-study>