



Beyond simple sleep hygiene to fight insomnia

Description

Methods, devices and products that can help you get a good night's sleep

By **Craig Cormack**

You have been rolling around in your bed hours. You feel wired, your legs are restless and your mind is full. You roll your eyes because it is only ten minutes after the last time you checked your clock. You pine for sleep, you feel exhausted, you have had a full day and yet, finding a way to get to sleep and stay asleep has been elusive. You feel very much alone lying there in your bed trying to fall asleep.

The good news is that you are not alone. Statistics Canada reported back in 2002 that approximately 13.4% of Canadians aged 15 years or more suffered from insomnia. The same study claimed that 25% of adults reported dissatisfaction with their sleep and 6 to 10% met the criteria for an insomnia disorder.¹ This study was done almost 20 years ago. With the inventions of the Internet, the 24-hour news cycle and the usage of tablets and smartphones, even more people are suffering from insomnia.



Two kinds of Insomnia

According to experts Dr. Bennet and Dr. Arcand, there are two kinds of insomnia: situational insomnia and chronic insomnia. Situational insomnia is usually short-lived and is defined as poor sleep related to specific circumstances, for example, a trauma in the family, a new sleep environment, stress in a new job, shift work, consumption of stimulants that cause insomnia. The remedy for this is time and changing habits. Unfortunately, situational insomnia is usually the precursor for chronic insomnia. Chronic Insomnia is diagnosed when you have been having troubles sleeping for more than a year.²

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The health costs of Insomnia

Chronic insomnia causes health problems such as chronic disease and mortality in seniors. Insomnia increase inflammation in the body as indicated by C-reactive protein in the blood. High levels of this protein may indicate future events such as heart problems, hypertension, weight gain and type 2 diabetes.

The economic costs of Insomnia

The American Psychological Association reported the following information from a survey in 2019:

Insomnia affects up to 40% of the population

Insomnia has great societal costs with reduced productivity, costs for absenteeism, accidents, hospitalization and death.

Increased cases of depression and alcohol and drug consumption



A conservative estimate places the cost of insomnia at between 92.5 to 107.5 billion dollars.³

The good news

The good news is that there are many ways in which a person can help themselves to achieve a better night's sleep, the first being to practice good sleep hygiene. The concept of sleep hygiene was developed in the late 1970s by psychologist Peter Hauri. Sleep hygiene recommendations include the reduction of caffeine and caffeinated products after 5 pm, exercising regularly but not too late in the day, establishing a regular sleep schedule, stress reduction, limiting light exposure from tablets and phones, reducing excitement before bed in terms of video gaming, avoiding alcohol and nicotine before bed, not using your bed for anything but sleeping or sex. Also, having a peaceful and dark sleep environment is recommended.

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The above prescription for getting a better night's sleep is excellent. However, there are methods, devices and products that can help you beyond basic sleep hygiene. This article will discuss these and give you a range of different possibilities you can implement for your own sleep plan.

The great promise of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy has shown great promise in helping people to deal with insomnia. It is a form of psychotherapy that helps patients focus in the moment. People are trained to identify, question and change thoughts, beliefs and attitudes so they can tackle their reactions to them. CBT helps people stand back from themselves to confront their problems as an observer. By taking this stance the person can then be in a position to help themselves rationally.

In a recent research study, CBT was compared to Tai Chi to see which therapy showed more promise. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy came out ahead of Tai Chi in this study, showing that it may have an effect on the C-reactive protein levels. The same study showed that these effects were long-lasting, still showing up a year after the study was completed.⁴

Practicing Qi Gong – Image: Public Domain

Limit the use of sleeping pills – try natural alternatives

Sleeping pills are helpful for short-term insomnia. However, over the long term, they can become a problem because most of them are addictive. They also lose their effectiveness and people who use them need to take higher doses to get the effect they are seeking. Also, sleeping pills leave many people with a hangover effect. There are many helpful herbal alternatives that you can try.

Chamomile tea

Chamomile, which is an herb, can be taken in a tea or pill format. This herb is native to Southern and Eastern Europe and Western Asia. It has been promoted as a remedy for both sleep and relaxation for centuries. Chamomile seems to work on the Gaba receptors and studies have shown promise for this herb.



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Gaba tea

Gaba Tea is becoming available here in North America. This type of tea was first developed by the Japanese in the 1980s but has only become popular recently because the developers have improved the taste. Gaba tea is made through a special fermentation process that uses both hydrogen and oxygen in the process. This process increases the amount of Gaba in the tea itself. Gaba tea can come in the form of black, green or oolong tea. Studies have shown that Gaba tea crosses the blood-brain barrier and helps induce relaxation, lower blood pressure and helps sleep. Gaba has also shown promise in helping ameliorate depression symptoms.⁵

Valerian root

Valerian root has shown great promise in remedying insomnia. In studies going back to the 1980s, subjects who were given Valerian root reported impressive results, in some cases over 80% reduction in insomnia. According to researchers, valerian extracts cause both central nervous system depression and muscle relaxation. Apparently Valerian root has very large amounts of GABA, a neurochemical that helps sedation. A placebo-controlled crossover trial of 128 volunteers reported 400 mg of valerian extract at bedtime led to improved sleep quality, decreased sleep latency, and reduced the number of night awakenings.⁶

Lavender

Lavender is a plant that has historically been used as a sleep aid. Typically lavender is inhaled in an oil format made from the flower. In a small study conducted in 2011 with ten postmenopausal women, lavender had the action of decreasing the heart rate and also had the effect of increasing heart rate variability. This resulted in relaxation and a great improvement in sleep quality in all participants with results still appearing a week after termination of the study.⁷

'Make sure you keep your doctor and other therapists apprised of anything you are doing or taking to get a better night's sleep. Be careful of combining natural and pharmaceutical products as they may be contraindicated.'

Qi Gong (Chi Kung)

Qi Gong (Chi Kung) is an ancient system of exercise and healing developed some 2500 years ago. Translated Qi Gong means "breath work." This system was developed originally by Shaolin monks to make themselves stronger, helping them to absorb punishment and giving them more stamina in combat. From these beginnings, Qi Gong was adopted by Chinese Medicine practitioners who learned Qi Gong and then taught it to their patients to help speed recovery. Qi Gong for health was then adopted by the public as a way to prevent illness. Today, millions of people around the world reap the benefits of practice and there are literally thousands of forms of Qi Gong. Qi Gong practice has helped many recover from illness by balancing and restoring energy to people. The practice of Qi Gong reinforces the immune system, warding off illness.

Qi Gong has been tested and found to have positive effects against high blood pressure, heart problems, musculoskeletal pain, depression and anxiety and insomnia to name but a few. People suffering with insomnia



should consider learning Qi Gong exercise and meditation classes.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone secreted by the pineal gland. It is specifically helpful for those who suffer from situational insomnia, for example, those suffering from jet lag. Night shift workers suffering from insomnia have found that melatonin can help them sleep better. In some cases, physicians have prescribed melatonin in lieu of sleeping medications to those suffering from insomnia due to depression. It appears to be a safe and effective way of dealing with sleep issues. Most dosages of melatonin fall within 0.3 to 5 mg per night.

Weighted blankets

Weighted blankets have become very popular with many manufacturers coming on the scene recently offering the public a better night's sleep. In two studies conducted in Sweden, the first with autistic patients and the second with psychiatric patients, both studies found great improvements in sleep performance. Studies showed that participants moved less during the night, awakened less and reported that they felt more relaxed using weighted blankets. More studies are needed but weighted blankets show great promise as a non-pharmaceutical approach to helping people with insomnia. Recently I had the opportunity to test drive a weighted blanket by Hush, a Canadian manufacturer of weighted blankets.⁸ I found that I felt more relaxed and I had a better night's sleep. Also, I didn't wake up during the night at all which is unusual for me. The only drawback is the blanket can be very hot.

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Basic sleep hygiene offers many solutions to insomnia, however, beyond this, there are many other possible remedies available. These include teas, aromatherapy, psychotherapy, exercise and meditation. You can also try massage and/or acupuncture. Remedies can be tried independently or in combination. Make sure you keep your doctor and other therapists apprised of anything you are doing or taking to get a better night's sleep. Be careful of combining natural and pharmaceutical products as they may be contraindicated. If you have any questions consult your doctor or pharmacists about combinations. Most of all, take heart and realize that insomnia in most cases is temporary and soon you will be enjoying a good night's sleep.

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