

## Put Insomnia to Rest Using Naturopathic Medicine

By Sara Korsunsky BSc., N.D.

- Sleep difficulties are estimated to be the #1 health related problem in North America.
- Over 50% of adults report trouble sleeping at least a few nights of the week.
- We sleep an average of 6.9 hours per night, which is almost 1 hour less than a few decades ago!
- Lack of sleep leads to fatigue, obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, shortened lifespan, depression, low immunity and is implicated in diabetes.

Insomnia is characterized by difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, and affects women ten times more often than men. This discrepancy may be due to hormonal fluctuations as well as the fact that women tend to wear many hats- working, caring for family, and running a home are very demanding and stressful jobs indeed! Adequate sleep is necessary for the body to heal and for emotions to be processed. A lack of sleep puts you at a greater risk for heart disease, infection, high blood sugar levels and obesity, and causes the body's stress hormones to become unbalanced. Fortunately there are ways to treat insomnia naturally at home and with a Naturopathic Doctor that are safe and very effective.

### What is Naturopathic Medicine?

Naturopathic Medicine is patient-centered health care that treats the whole person and focuses on finding and addressing the causes of disease. Naturopathic Doctors are trained in the same basic sciences and diagnostics as MD's, but the treatments used aim to support and enhance the body's natural healing processes and emphasize prevention of ill health. Treatment plans for insomnia are based on individual's health concerns and pertinent causes, and would include a combination of naturopathic techniques geared towards eliminating the causes of insomnia.

### The Causes of Insomnia

Insomnia can be either short term or chronic. Short term insomnia is often a reaction to stress or change and may follow a traumatic event, illness, surgery, weather changes or traveling. Chronic insomnia is most often linked to anxiety and stress, and may become habitual, wherein a person knows that they will be unable to sleep and becomes focused on this, preventing the very thing that they desire most- to fall asleep. These individuals usually do sleep for brief periods throughout the night, but develop amnesia for these sleep periods. There is also usually an imprinted event that has triggered this pattern of sleep avoidance. Pregnancy, menstruation and menopause are common times in a woman's life where insomnia is experienced due to discomfort and fluctuations in hormone levels. Progesterone tends to promote sleep and is low during menstruation and menopause. Women may feel sleepier around ovulation when progesterone rises.

It is important that other medical problems be ruled out before commencing natural treatments of insomnia. These may include hyperthyroidism, sleep apnea, and alcoholism and depression, which can manifest either as hypersomnia (too much sleep),

or as insomnia. Overuse of stimulants such as caffeine and sugar may also be responsible, as may food sensitivities that are not traditionally allergenic but lead to digestive complaints. Taking prescription medicines or hormones such as estrogen before bed can affect sleep cycles and should be investigated with a pharmacist or MD for the best administration time. A condition called adrenal fatigue can lead to insomnia when the adrenal glands are producing cortisol, the body's major stress hormone, improperly, either at the wrong time of day, or in excessive amounts. Cortisol is meant to be lowest in the evening and highest at 8 am, and excess amount in the blood can lead to excitability and difficulty sleeping at appropriate times, with extreme fatigue at other times.

### Conventional Treatments for Insomnia

Sleeping pills have harmful side effects such as mental fogging, decreased short term memory and impaired physical ability which can all lead to accidents and injury. They also cause accentuation of the brains' GABA neurotransmitters, which can depress lung function leading to asphyxiation, and resulted in over 1000 overdose related deaths last year. Trazodone, which is an antidepressant that is used to treat the insomnia of fibromyalgia, induces alpha wave sleep that is associated with wakefulness, as opposed to delta wave sleep, which is the type of sleep in which true healing occurs. Prescription medications do not treat the causes of insomnia and often lead to chemical addiction. They should only be used short term and not by those over 65 years old or with sleep apnea.

### Naturopathic Treatments for Insomnia

**Sleep hygiene-** healthy "sleep hygiene" is essential to a good night's sleep. This entails maintaining an environment that is dark, quiet, and comfortable, and may necessitate changing the type of mattress, blinds, or temperature of the bedroom to maximize comfort. It also involves establishing consistent positive routines at bedtime. Going to bed within the same hour on a nightly basis will give your body the message that it is time for sleep, and engaging in quiet, non-stimulating activities such as reading, drinking a cup of tea or bathing will help your mind and your body wind down. Writing in a journal before bed can help to clean out your brain's high activity zones, and keeping a notepad by the bed will prevent forgetting important ideas that pop into your head while you're falling asleep. Don't eat large meals shortly before bed, but assure not to go to bed hungry. Most importantly, always try to get as much sleep as possible before twelve a.m. Each hour of sleep prior to midnight is as worthy as two hours after.

**Natural supplements-** Herbs such as chamomile, lemon balm, valerian, hops and passionflower are available alone or as combinations in teas, capsules and tinctures and are best administered in the later day and evening to avoid daytime sleepiness. These herbs and others are safe, mild nervine tonics that address the symptoms of both anxiety and insomnia. Hormone balancing herbs are indicated when there is a hormonal link to insomnia. Melatonin is sold in capsule form and is a commonly used over the counter sleep aid, but can cause some grogginess the following day and should be used with caution. It is especially useful for those who travel through time zones or do shift work. 5-hydroxytryptophan is the direct precursor to serotonin, the neurotransmitter involved in sleep. It is available over the counter and helps promote deep, relaxed sleep and is also

found in foods like turkey and nuts. These are just a few of the many effective sleep aid supplements that help to decrease anxiety and relax the mind.

**Acupuncture-** Chinese medicine is very helpful at calming the mind and treating the causes of insomnia. According to Chinese Medicine, the heart meridian governs the mind and sleep, and when the mind is too active, insomnia occurs. Acupuncture is a gentle, safe and relatively painless treatment that addresses the whole person by balancing the body's energy meridians, reducing stress and relieving muscle tension.

**Homeopathy-** The ancient science of homeopathy is based on the principle of like curing like, and uses minute doses of natural substances to help the body reestablish balance and get rid of symptoms. The best part about homeopathy is that the prescriptions take all of a person's physical, emotional and mental symptoms into account, resulting in healing on several levels. Considering insomnia's complexity, homeopathy is well suited as a natural treatment with no side effects.

**Exercise-** Aerobic physical exercise relieves stress, especially when done outdoors, since daytime exposure to maintain the body's circadian rhythm. A Stanford University Medical School controlled study showed that after 16 weeks, adults who exercised regularly (about 4 times per week) were able to fall asleep 15 minutes faster and sleep 45 minutes longer at night. It is important to work up at least a small sweat, and is best to exercise 4-5 hours before sleep so that your core body temperature has time to decrease before bed. Although non-aerobic, gentle forms of yoga such as Hatha and Iyengar offer specific sequences of poses that are helpful treatments for insomnia at home.

Insomnia is a complex problem and needs to be treated as such, through careful evaluation of its causes and a holistic approach to healing. Sleep medications are short term, band-aid solutions to the problem with dangerous side effects. Naturopathic Doctors will listen to all of your health concerns and offer you a personalized treatment plan using treatments that address the causes of insomnia. Supported lifestyle and nutritional changes and gentle naturopathic remedies are effective ways to treat insomnia that will also have positive long term effects in all areas of your life, so that you can sleep well and rest easy that you are ensuring a healthy future.

Bio and practices

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