

- Sleep

Insomnia keeping you up at night?

The Press · 27 Oct 2022 · 23

Lack of sleep is a curse of the modern era. Research by international sleep experts shows that not getting enough shut-eye doesn't just make you tired, grumpy and unable to function well during the day – it can also increase your desire to eat unhealthy foods, and contribute to serious health problems.



Sleep disorders experts say poor sleep slows metabolism and makes the body release both the stress hormone cortisol, and the hunger hormone ghrelin.

One Columbia University study found sleep deprivation causes healthy people to eat more overall, and crave fatty, sweet and salty food; in some cases gobbling up 300 more calories a day compared with well-rested people.

Brain scans of sleep-deprived volunteers revealed that showing them pictures of unhealthy food triggered the brain's "reward centre", making it harder to resist temptation.

Insomnia is best thought of a symptom of another problem, researchers say, so overcoming it usually requires discovering the root cause. It could be as simple as too much coffee, or a more complex underlying issue such as asthma, allergies, acid reflux, Parkinson's disease, hyperthyroidism, kidney disease or cancer.

Insomnia can also indicate other sleep disorders such as sleep apnoea, restless legs syndrome and circadian rhythm disturbances from working night shifts. Prescription medicines may also interfere with sleep.

Emotional issues such as stress, anxiety and depression are estimated to cause half of all insomnia cases, which in turn can worsen these conditions, making it all the more important to get to the root of the problem.

To identify contributing habits and behaviours, try keeping a sleep diary to record your sleep and wake times and other pertinent information. You can do this manually, or download a 'sleep tracking' app. It may help you connect a poor sleep with, say, that late-night glass of wine.

If you have ruled out medical causes, here are some tips to help you combat insomnia:

- Establish a regular sleep schedule: Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, including weekends, to support your biological clock.

- **Keep the bedroom cool, dark and quiet:** Electronic screens emit a blue light that disrupts the body's production of melatonin and makes you less sleepy, so turn them off at least an hour before bed. Read or listen to a podcast or music.
- **Don't drink close to bedtime:** Waking up to use the toilet is more of a problem as we age, so no drinks an hour before bed.
- **Reduce your alcohol intake:** Alcohol may help you relax and fall asleep but it interferes with sleep cycles, increasing the likelihood of waking in the night.
- **Cut down on caffeine:** We all know people who drink coffee right before bed and sleep like logs, but most of us should avoid it within six hours of bedtime.
- **Try not to worry about sleep in bed:** Stressing about getting to sleep or how tired you will be tomorrow floods your body with adrenaline, keeping you awake.
- **Get up if you can't sleep:** Tossing and turning increases anxiety, so if you really can't sleep, get up and do something relaxing such as reading.
- **Exercise daily:** Exercise has been shown to improve sleep, but keep it gentle in the evening, to avoid getting 'amped' up.
- **Try yoga or meditation before bed:** The gentle stretching, deep breathing and relaxation may help you settle.

Sleep deprivation is also a risk factor for stroke, cardiovascular disease, hypertension and type 2 diabetes, so if none of these suggestions remedy the issue, before you reach for the sleeping pills, consider seeing a sleep specialist or psychologist.

A Harvard Medical School study showed that CBT (cognitive-behavioural therapy) that aims to modify negative thoughts, emotions and patterns of behaviour, was more effective than prescription sleep medication at treating chronic insomnia, and without the risks or side effects.