

# Insomnia

Insomnia is when you have an ongoing problem with getting to and staying asleep. It usually gets better if you change your sleeping habits.

## Check if you have insomnia

You may have insomnia if you regularly:

- find it hard to go to sleep
- wake up several times during the night
- lie awake at night
- wake up early and cannot go back to sleep
- do not feel rested in the morning
- feel tired and irritable during the day
- find it difficult to concentrate during the day because you're tired

You can have these symptoms for months, sometimes years.

## How much sleep you need

Everyone needs different amounts of sleep.

On average we need:

- Adults – 7 to 9 hours
- Children – 9 to 13 hours
- Toddlers and babies – 12 to 17 hours

## What causes insomnia

The most common causes of insomnia are:

- stress, anxiety or depression
- noisy surroundings
- a room that's too hot or cold

- an uncomfortable bed
- smoking or drinking alcohol or caffeine close to your bedtime
- watching a television or using a smartphone close to your bedtime

Some illnesses and medicines can disrupt sleep. Talk to your GP if you are concerned about this.

## How you can treat insomnia yourself

Insomnia usually gets better if you change your sleeping habits.

Watching television or using devices such as a smartphone in bed can result in poor sleep. This happens because the bright light of these devices tells your brain to wake up and not go to sleep.

If you watch television in bed, try removing it from your bedroom. Avoid using your smartphone or laptop for about 1 hour before your bedtime.

Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol, tea, coffee or other stimulating drinks at least 6 hours before going to bed.

Try to:

- go to bed and wake up at the same time every day
- decide on a suitable bedtime when you usually feel tired - it's not helpful to go to bed if you're not ready for sleep
- relax for at least 1 hour before bed – for example, take a bath or read a book
- make sure your mattress, pillows and covers are comfortable
- exercise regularly during the day

The following things may also contribute towards a bad night's sleep:

- Eating a big meal late at night
- Exercising at least 4 hours before bed
- Napping during the day
- Driving when you feel sleepy
- Sleeping in, for example at weekends – stick to your regular sleeping hours instead

## Treatment from your GP

It's important to see your GP if:

- changing your sleeping habits has not worked
- you've had trouble sleeping for months
- your sleep problems are affecting your daily life

Your GP will try to find out what's causing your insomnia so you get the right treatment.

Sometimes you will be referred to a therapist for support. Talking with a professional can help you

change how you think about your sleep and help improve your sleeping habits.

Poor sleep is often a sign of:

- [anxiety](#)
- [panic](#)
- [low mood](#)

Find out more about [talking therapies](#)

## Sleeping pills

GPs rarely prescribe sleeping pills to treat insomnia. Sleeping pills can have serious side effects and you can become dependent on them.

Sleeping pills are only prescribed for a few days or weeks if:

- your insomnia is very bad
- other treatments have not worked

## Sleep disorders

Sleep disorders are also known as parasomnias.

The most common ones are:

- [night terrors](#) - where you wake up with a sudden shock, usually with a scream or shout, about 90 minutes or so after falling asleep
- [sleep paralysis](#) - where you wake up but you are unable to move your body and unable to speak for a short while
- [sleepwalking](#) - walking around the house, wandering outside, carrying things or searching in cupboards
- restless leg syndrome - constant, involuntary irritation of the legs causing movement when you go to bed
- [obstructive sleep apnoea](#) - a condition which causes repeated upper airway collapse during sleep, resulting in irregular breathing at night and excessive sleepiness during the day

Talk to your GP if you are experiencing any of these sleep disorders or obstructive sleep apnoea.

Find out more about [panic disorder](#)

Find out more about [generalised anxiety disorder](#)

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