

In Pursuit of Sleep

By Andrea Lamont

It is not unusual to have difficulty sleeping from time to time. However, if you feel that you do not get enough sleep or a satisfying sleep, you may have insomnia. Insomnia is a sleeping disorder that affects one in seven Canadians and roughly 50 percent of seniors. People with insomnia have one or more of the following:

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Waking up often during the night and having trouble going back to sleep
- Waking up too early in the morning
- Waking after sleep not feeling refreshed

The two basic types of insomnia are acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term). Acute insomnia can last anywhere from one night to

a few weeks. Causes for acute insomnia can include illness, stress, jet lag, or environmental factors such as noise or light, which interfere with sleep.

Chronic insomnia lasts for a month or more and is often caused by depression, pain or chronic stress. Treatment for chronic insomnia must address the underlying condition or health problems that are causing the insomnia.

It is not recommended to use over-the-counter sleeping pills for insomnia. Most medicines that are used for sleep have side effects and must be used with caution. Often these medications cause daytime drowsiness, dependency, and can cause rebound insomnia unless even higher doses are taken.

Insomnia affects nearly everyone at some point in his or her life. It is important to remember, however, that it is not defined by the number of hours you sleep every night. The amount of sleep needed varies from person to person. While most people need between seven and eight hours of sleep a night, other people do well with less, and some need more. If you think that you have insomnia, by making a few simple lifestyle changes, healthful sleep doesn't have to be just a dream.

Andrea Lamont, RTCMP, is a registered acupuncturist practicing in Vancouver, BC. She can be reached at Glow Acupuncture and Wellness Center at (778) 786-2517 or visit her website at www.glowwellness.com.

Tips for a good night's sleep

- Avoid strenuous exercise before bedtime. Do not exercise at least three hours before bedtime.
- Turn off the TV at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day (or on most days).
- Create a relaxing bedtime ritual, like taking a hot bath with aromatherapy oils.
- Sleep primarily at night. Daytime naps steal hours from nighttime slumber. Limit daytime sleep to less than one hour, no later than 3 p.m.
- Eat lightly in the evening. A heavy meal too close to bedtime interferes with sleep. If you need a snack, try eating things that raise your melatonin production. Suggestions include: soy nuts, chicken, cottage cheese, pumpkin seeds, turkey, oats, rice, ginger, barley and tomatoes.
- Avoid bright light around the house before bed. Using dimmer switches in living rooms and bathrooms before bed can be helpful.
- Avoid caffeine at least six hours (and preferably eight hours) before bedtime. The stimulant found in coffee, pop, tea and chocolate can make it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- Use the bed just for sleeping and sex. Avoid watching TV, using laptop computers, or reading in bed. Bright light from these activities may inhibit sleep. If it helps to read before sleep, sit close to a low-wattage light bulb.
- Avoid looking at the clock if you wake up in the middle of the night. It can cause anxiety.
- If you can't get to sleep for over 30 minutes, get out of bed and do something boring in dim light till you are sleepy.
- If you have trouble laying awake worrying about things, try making a to-do list before you go to bed. This may help you to "let go" of those worries.
- Avoid alcohol. Although alcohol is a depressant and may help you fall asleep, the subsequent metabolism that clears it from your body when you are sleeping causes a withdrawal syndrome. This withdrawal causes awakenings and is often associated with nightmares and sweats.
- Deficiencies in certain vitamins and minerals may disrupt sleep. Ensure that you are taking adequate doses of calcium, magnesium and B vitamins. Additionally, many people find a tea of chamomile or valerian especially beneficial.
- Seek the help of an acupuncturist. Acupuncture is particularly effective in treating insomnia, with many people reporting immediate improvements in their sleeping habits. With acupuncture, the sensation of sleep comes easily, lasts without interruption, and is deeper and more refreshing. Chinese medicine recognizes many forms of insomnia, and each is treated with a different combination of points (needles), as well as different herbal formulas. Treatments also differ depending on the needs of each individual.

