

# Insomnia—How do I beat it?

by Maya Fallows, O.T. Reg. (NS)  
CASE COORDINATOR, NSTU EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

## ABOUT INSOMNIA

Most adults have experienced insomnia or sleeplessness at some point in their lives. Approximately 40 per cent of adults report to have experienced this condition. People who have insomnia may have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or they may wake up too early in the morning. We are aware of how we feel and perform after one or more sleepless nights, however, few of us seek medical advice and many of us remain unaware of the strategies we can use to deal with insomnia.

You may wonder how much sleep you need each night. Good sleep is not defined as a specific number of hours of sleep, as we all vary in our sleep requirements. Although most adults require seven or eight hours each night, you know you are not getting enough sleep if you feel tired during the day or notice a decrease in your daytime function.

Getting adequate sleep is essential to maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle. Insomnia can affect you mentally and physically. It can affect your ability to concentrate and perform activities during the daytime. It can make you feel drowsy, depressed and irritable. If your inability to obtain adequate sleep continues over a prolonged period, you are at increased risk of developing high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes.

## CAUSES

Insomnia may be caused by various factors. Short-term insomnia may simply be related to jet lag, noise or an uncomfortable room temperature. Loss of sleep may also be related to stressful

life situations such as the loss of a loved one, divorce, increased workload, job insecurity/unemployment or an acute medical condition. Long-term insomnia may be the result of psychological concerns such as anxiety, stress or depression. In fact, insomnia is sometimes an indicator of depression. Medical conditions can also trigger insomnia and include chronic pain and fatigue syndromes, acid reflux disease, certain lung diseases and degenerative conditions such as Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s disease. Certain medications may also have side effects affecting your sleep pattern.

## WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE

If you are suffering from insomnia, you should consult your doctor if the problem lasts longer than three to four weeks; sooner if it begins to interfere with activities of daily living and your ability to function. Insomnia may be a symptom of another medical or psychological problem or it may be related to your current medication regiment, both of which should be addressed by a physician.

If you are experiencing insomnia, seek the assistance of your family physician. Your doctor may inquire about your sleep habits, medications, intake of caffeine or alcohol, whether you smoke, conditions that may be causing you pain, or events in your life that are causing you emotional turmoil. If the cause of your insomnia is not clear, you may be asked to complete a sleep diary to identify patterns and conditions that may be affecting your sleep. The key is to find out what is causing the insomnia so that the problem can be dealt with directly. Many people can sleep better by making a few changes to their sleep habits.



## PREVENTION

### Tips to help you form good sleep habits:

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends. This will help accustom your body to sleep at night.
- Establish a bedtime routine. Maintain a pattern that your body can connect with sleep, e.g., warm bath, bedtime snack, brush teeth, read for 10 minutes followed by going to bed.
- Use the bedroom for sleeping only. Don’t watch television while you are in bed.
- Control your environment. Ensure your bedroom is a quiet and dark environment. If white noise is helpful, you can use a fan to block noise coming from another room. Alternatively, ear plugs will work well. Avoid extreme temperatures.
- Refrain from taking naps during the day if possible as this may make your insomnia worse. If you need to nap, limit your nap to 15 minutes unless directed by your doctor.
- If you are still awake after trying to fall asleep for 30 minutes, try a relaxing activity such as listening to soothing music or reading.

### Tips to help improve sleep:

- Avoid or reduce the use of caffeine, decongestants, alcohol and tobacco.
- Avoid large meals, excessive fluid intake, and strenuous exercise before bedtime.
- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a small snack before bed such as warm milk and toast.
- Find effective ways to manage your stress. Learn relaxation techniques such as deep breathing or meditation.
- Don’t lie in bed worrying about problems. Deal with issues during the day whenever possible. If you find your wheels still turning at bedtime, write down the issues and your concerns, and what you can do about them AFTER you have had a good night’s sleep.

*For more information about Insomnia, visit The College of Family Physicians of Canada at [www.cfpc.ca](http://www.cfpc.ca) or eMedicine Health at [www.emedicinehealth.com](http://www.emedicinehealth.com). To learn more about good sleep habits and tips to improve your sleep, speak to your doctor, or contact the NSTU Counselling Services or Early Intervention Program for Teachers.*

**did you KNOW?**

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at **Be\_Well@nstu.ca**.

Please contact Erin at [ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca](mailto:ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca) to provide her with your NSTU email address. The **Be\_Well@nstu.ca** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

