

Self-care information on...

Insomnia



What is insomnia?

Insomnia means poor sleep. It is defined as:

- Difficulty in getting to sleep
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Waking up too early
- Not feeling refreshed after a night's sleep despite adequate time and opportunity to sleep.

What is a normal amount of sleep?

Different people need different amounts of sleep. Some people function well with just 3-4 hours' sleep a night. 6-8 hours' sleep per night is average.

Most people establish a pattern that is normal for them in their early adult life. However, as you become older, it is normal to sleep less. Many people in their 70s sleep less than six hours per night.

What causes insomnia?

Poor sleep may develop for no apparent reason. However, there are a number of possible causes which include the following:

- **Concern about waking up during the night** – you may feel that to wake in the night is not normal, and worry about getting back off to sleep. You may then have an impression of having a bad night's sleep, even when the total amount of time asleep was normal.
- **Temporary problems** such as a work or family problem, jet-lag, a change of routine, a strange bed, etc. Poor sleep in these situations usually improves in time.
- **Anxiety or depression**
- **Other illnesses or conditions**, such as pain, breathlessness, indigestion, cough, itch, hot flushes.
- **Stimulants and some medicines**, for example:
 - Alcohol – alcohol causes broken sleep and early morning wakefulness.
 - Caffeine – caffeine is a stimulant and may cause poor sleep. It is found in tea, coffee, some soft drinks such as cola, and even chocolate. It is also in some painkiller tablets and other medicines.
 - Nicotine (from smoking) – nicotine is a stimulant and may cause poor sleep.
 - Diuretics ('water tablets') – diuretics increase the frequency that you pass water. This can disrupt sleep.
 - Steroids – steroids can cause difficulty getting to sleep.
 - Cold remedies containing pseudoephedrine – pseudoephedrine is a stimulant and may cause poor sleep.
- **Unrealistic expectations** – some people just need less sleep than others. If your sleep pattern has not changed, and you do not feel sleepy during the day, then you are probably getting enough sleep. Older people and people who do little exercise tend to need less sleep.

Whatever the initial cause, worrying about feeling tired may make the problem worse.

What can you do to help improve poor sleep?

- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol six hours before bedtime.
- Do not have a heavy meal just before bedtime.
- Regular daytime exercise can help you to feel more relaxed and tired at bedtime but avoid any strenuous exercise within 4 hours of bedtime.
- Establish fixed times for going to bed and waking up; avoid sleeping in after a poor night's sleep and avoid daytime naps. If you keep to a pattern you are more likely to sleep well.
- Get up at the same time each day, seven days a week, however short the time asleep. Do not use weekends to catch up on sleep.
- The bedroom should be a dark, quiet, relaxing place to sleep; it should not be too hot, cold, or noisy.
- Try to relax and wind down before going to bed. Do not do anything that is mentally demanding within 90 minutes of going to bed - such as studying.
- Do not watch television or use any back lit device e.g. tablets and phones, for an hour before trying to go to sleep. The use of non-backlit e-readers and paper books is ok.
- Do not use the bedroom for activities such as work, eating or watching television.
- Hide your alarm clock under your bed. Many people will clock watch and this does not help you to get off to sleep.
- If after 30 minutes you cannot get to sleep, get up and go into another room and try to do something else (light reading or listening to relaxing music) until you feel sleepy, then go back to bed.

What about sleeping tablets?

Sleeping tablets are not usually advised. Problems with sleeping tablets include:

- Drowsiness the next day.
- Clumsiness and confusion in the night if you have to get up.
- Tolerance to sleeping tablets may develop if you take them regularly. This means that, in time, the usual dose has no effect.
- Many people become dependent (addicted) on sleeping tablets if they take them for longer than a couple of weeks.
- They can interact with other medicines leading to increased drowsiness and falls.

If a sleeping tablet is prescribed, it will normally be for a short course (a week or so) to get over a particularly bad patch and to establish a sleep pattern.

When to contact your GP practice

- If you feel that illness or medication is causing poor sleep. Treating any underlying condition that is causing the problem can help to promote sleep. In particular, depression and anxiety are common causes of poor sleep and can often be managed.
- If the self-help tips over the page have not worked and the insomnia is significantly affecting your daily life.
- If you are currently taking sleeping tablets and would like to reduce them or stop them completely.

The Suffolk Wellbeing Service offers various types of support to help you make changes in your life to improve your wellbeing and help you cope with stresses, anxiety and depression. These include stress control and wellbeing workshops/classes, telephone support, group therapies and some short term therapy/counseling. You can self refer via phone or e mail.

- Telephone: 0300 123 1781
- Website: <https://www.readytochange.org.uk/suffolk>

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: <http://www.nhs.uk>
- Patient UK <http://www.patient.co.uk>

