

# Insomnia

## WHAT IS INSOMNIA?

Insomnia refers to problems falling asleep or staying asleep. It can also be a problem of waking up too early in the morning. About 10% of adolescents have chronic insomnia. It is less common in children. Insomnia can be a short-term problem, usually because a stressful event, or it can be long term and chronic.

Sometimes insomnia is a symptom that is caused by something else. It may be the result of another sleep disorder or another problem, such as anxiety.

## WHAT CAUSES INSOMNIA?

Insomnia almost always involves poor sleep habits, such as spending too much time in bed, napping during the day, or not going to bed and waking up at the same time every day. It also usually involves negative thoughts about sleep, such as “I’ll never be able to fall asleep tonight,” and tension and worry about sleeping.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF INSOMNIA?

A child or adolescent with insomnia may have the following symptoms:

- **Difficulty sleeping:** A child or adolescent with insomnia has difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or may wake too early in the morning.
- **Behaviors that interfere with sleep:** Such behaviors may include worrying during the day about falling asleep at night and trying too hard to fall asleep. Adolescents with insomnia often can fall asleep easily at other times, such as while watching television.
- **Tension about sleep:** A child or adolescent with insomnia is usually tense about going to bed and about being able to sleep.
- **Daytime problems:** A child or adolescent with insomnia may have problems during the day. He may be tired, moody, or irritable.

## HOW IS INSOMNIA DIAGNOSED?

There is no definitive test for insomnia. A diagnosis of insomnia is made based on the description of symptoms. A doctor will want to be sure there are no other problems, such as another sleep disorder, a medical problem, or a psychiatric problem.

## HOW IS INSOMNIA TREATED?

Treatment of insomnia, because it is a learned habit, requires effort and patience. Treatment can involve the following.

- **Healthy sleep habits:** Healthy sleep habits are essential for children and adolescents with insomnia. These include the following:
  - A regular sleep schedule, including going to bed and waking up at the same time every day.
  - Avoiding caffeine, smoking, and other drugs.

- A bedroom that is cool, dark, quiet, and comfortable.
- A bedtime routine that is calm and sleep inducing.
- Remove electronics from the bedroom and avoid late evening screen time, including television viewing, computer use, video gaming, cell phones, and back-lit e-readers.
- **Relaxation:** Relaxation strategies, such as deep breathing, positive imagery (e.g., being on a beach), or meditation, can help at bedtime. It will also give your child something pleasant to think about while lying in bed.
- **Change thoughts about sleep:** Most children or adolescents with insomnia have negative thoughts about sleep. These thoughts should be replaced by positive ones. For example, rather than saying, “I won’t be able to sleep tonight,” it is better to think, “Tonight I’ll just relax and rest at bedtime.”
- **Don’t be a clock watcher:** Remove the clock from the bedroom, as watching a clock during the night may feed your child’s anxiety. This will make it harder for your child to fall asleep.
- **Restrict the time in bed:** Set bedtime so that the time in bed is equal to the usual amount of sleep each night, such as 7 or 8 hours. Being extra sleepy will help your child to fall asleep right away and stay asleep. Once that happens, bedtime can be moved earlier by 15 minutes every few nights until the desired bedtime is reached.
- **Get out of bed:** Rather than lying in bed tossing and turning, it’s better to get out of bed and do another activity. This will help prevent the bedroom from being associated with not being able to sleep. After 20 minutes of trying to fall asleep, get out of bed for 20 minutes and do something relaxing, such as reading—*not looking at social media!* Then try again, repeating the 20-minutes-in-bed, 20-minutes-out-of-bed cycle.
- **Medication:** Medications are usually not recommended for children and adolescents with insomnia.

### Seven Rules for Beating Insomnia

1. **Choose a set wake-up time:** Wake up at the same time every day, no matter how much or how little sleep you got the night before.
2. **Choose a bedtime:** Choose the earliest possible bedtime that is late enough that you are sleepy but is not so early that it doesn’t let you be in bed too long. You only want to spend the amount of time in bed that you actually need for sleep.
3. **Go to bed when you are sleepy, but not before your chosen bedtime:** Don’t go to bed until you are sleepy. So, if you are still wide awake at your chosen bedtime, wait a while longer until you are sleepy enough to fall asleep quickly.
4. **Get out of bed when you can’t sleep:** If you are lying in bed and can’t sleep, get out of bed and do something relaxing out of the bedroom such as reading a book. Go back to bed when you feel sleepy enough to fall asleep quickly. Again, if you do not fall asleep quickly, get up. Keep repeating this cycle until you fall asleep. You need to get out of bed when you can’t sleep both at bedtime and in the middle of the night.
5. **Don’t worry or plan in bed:** When lying in bed at night, don’t spend the time worrying or planning for the next day. Set aside another time of the day to do these things. If you automatically start thinking and worrying when you get in bed, get up and don’t head back to bed until your thoughts won’t interfere with falling asleep. Thinking in bed is a habit, and one that you can break.
6. **Only use your bed for sleep:** Don’t do anything but sleep in your bed. That is, don’t do other activities, such as watch television or do homework.
7. **Avoid naps:** Naps will interfere with your ability to fall asleep at bedtime, so no naps.

Adapted from Owens, J. A., & Mindell, J. A. (2005). *Take Charge of Your Child’s Sleep*. New York: Marlowe.