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Patient information: Insomnia (Beyond the Basics)

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INTRODUCTION

Insomnia is defined as difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, or unrefreshing sleep. In general, people with insomnia sleep less or sleep poorly despite having an adequate chance to sleep. The poor sleep may lead to trouble functioning during the daytime.

Insomnia is not defined by the number of hours slept because "sufficient sleep" can vary from one person to another. Sleep requirements may also decrease with age.

Insomnia is the most common sleep complaint in the United States. While almost everyone has an occasional night of poor sleep, approximately 10 percent of adults have long-term or chronic insomnia.

This article will review the symptoms, causes, and diagnosis of insomnia. Treatment of insomnia is discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Insomnia treatments \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".) More detailed information about insomnia is available by subscription. (See "[Overview of insomnia](#)".)

INSOMNIA SYMPTOMS

Common symptoms of insomnia include:

- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Variable sleep, such as several nights of poor sleep followed by a night of better sleep.
- Daytime fatigue or sleepiness
- Forgetfulness
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Reduced motivation or energy
- Increased errors or accidents
- Ongoing worry about sleep

For many people, the symptoms of insomnia interfere with personal relationships, job performance, and daily function. In one survey, people who experienced chronic insomnia had a two-fold increased risk of automobile accidents compared with people who were fatigued for other reasons [1].

People with insomnia have an impaired sense of sleep. You may feel that you have not slept, even if testing shows that you have. You may also feel more fatigued than individuals without insomnia, even if testing indicates that you are less sleepy. This impaired sense of sleep may be related to a problem with the body's sleep-arousal system, which normally helps you feel awake after sleeping and feel tired before going to bed.

One result of poor sleep is that you may become concerned that you will be sleep-deprived and will suffer from serious consequences of lost sleep. This concern may grow as you are unable to sleep, which in turn makes it increasingly difficult to fall asleep. It is important that you not get caught in this cycle and understand that you are sleeping more than it seems.

INSOMNIA CAUSES

Insomnia may have many causes (see "[Types of insomnia](#)):

Short-term insomnia — Short-term insomnia lasts three months or less and is usually caused by stressors. Possible stressors include the following:

- Changes in the sleeping environment (temperature, light, noise)
- The loss of a loved one, divorce, or job loss
- Recent illness, surgery, or sources of pain
- Use or withdrawal from stimulants (caffeine), certain medications (theophylline, beta blockers, steroids, thyroid replacement, and asthma inhalers), illegal drugs (cocaine and methamphetamine), or alcohol

Short-term insomnia often resolves when the stressor resolves.

Traveling across time zones is another common cause of short-term insomnia, known as jet lag. Jet lag may occur regardless of the direction of travel, although it is most pronounced when traveling west to east. Most people require several days to adjust their sleep pattern to the new time zone. Other tips are provided here ([table 1](#)).

Insomnia is common in individuals who work the night shift (ie, third shift). You may be sleepy at work and while driving home in the morning, but have difficulty staying asleep past noon. The sleep problems can be resolved by transferring from the night shift or by sleeping at the same time every day for several weeks. Shift work sleep disorder and other sleep timing disorders are summarized in the table ([table 2](#)).

Long-term insomnia — Long-term insomnia lasts longer than one month. Common causes include the following:

- Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety disorders (including panic attacks), and posttraumatic stress disorder
- Medical illnesses, especially those that cause pain, stress, or difficulty breathing
- Neurological disorders, such as Parkinson disease and Alzheimer disease
- Other sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, sleep apnea, periodic limb movements, and circadian rhythm disorders (see "[Patient information: Sleep apnea in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)")
- Medications or illegal drug use

