



What is Insomnia?

Insomnia is characterized by difficulties in getting to sleep, staying asleep, or sleep that is non-restorative in nature. As a result, these sleep disturbances, or the associated daytime fatigue, can cause significant distress or impairment in a person's professional, social, or quality of life. These difficulties in sleep can be grouped into three main categories:

- i) **Transient insomnia** lasts up to several days and typically occurs during times of stress, excitement, or anticipation.
- ii) **Short-term insomnia** lasts up to several weeks and typically occurs during times of severe or persistent stress.
- iii) **Chronic insomnia** lasts beyond several weeks, sometimes for months or even years. The main cause isn't always clear, as there are several factors that often contribute to persistent sleep difficulties.

Transient and short-term insomnia are temporary and will often be resolved once the stressor has subsided or is no longer causing significant distress in a person's life. Chronic insomnia, on the other hand, develops gradually and persists long after a stressor has subsided; it can even develop in the absence of a stressor.



What Causes Insomnia?

The causes of insomnia can be classified under two broad categories:

Primary insomnia, which is characterized by inadequate or inefficient sleep that does not stem from another medical, psychiatric, or environmental cause. It often involves negative conditioning (learned behaviour) in sleep. An example of this is the vicious cycle that often develops when a person is unable to sleep, increasing their preoccupation and frustration with sleep, thereby making it more difficult to obtain the sleep they need.

Secondary insomnia, which is characterized by inadequate or inefficient sleep that is brought on or worsened by another factor, illness, or medical condition. Some causes of insomnia include:

- **Medication and Substance Use** – disrupted sleep can be caused by the use or side effects of prescription medications, alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and prohibited drugs.
- **Other Sleep Disorders** – sleep apnea (a breathing disorder during sleep), restless legs, and periodic limb movements are examples of sleep disorders that can contribute to insomnia.
- **Psychiatric & Mood Disorders** – stress, depression, and anxiety are the most common causes of insomnia.
- **Circadian Rhythm Factors** – changes to a person's sleep/wake cycle (or "biological clock") is frequently associated with insomnia and daytime sleepiness. Examples of this include jet lag (when the body has not had a chance to adjust to time zone changes) and shift work operations (which may require people to work evenings, nights, or variable hours).
- **Other Medical Conditions** – underlying symptoms (e.g. pain), the treatment used to manage symptoms, or the distress caused by a physical illness can all adversely affect our quality of sleep.
- **Learned & Conditioned Behaviour** – many factors in our lives can increase our risk of developing insomnia at different times. Parenting young children, working stressful jobs, dealing with psychological or physical illness, etc., all have an impact on our lives, and potentially the quality of our sleep. Disruptions in sleep patterns can continue once these factors are no longer present, creating negative learned behaviour associated with poor sleep patterns.



What is the Impact of Insomnia?

Chronic insomnia can have profound personal, social, and economic consequences for an individual. Some examples of this include: decreased job performance and productivity, higher absenteeism, diminished general health, increased incidence of bodily pain, higher risk of psychiatric disorders, increased risk of accidents, and greater health care costs.



What is the Treatment for Insomnia?

A person should seek help from a health care professional if their sleep difficulties persist despite efforts to counteract them, or if these problems are causing significant distress to their daily functioning or quality of life.

An individual who experiences short-term insomnia is more susceptible to developing chronic insomnia; however, some of the same basic principles used to treat chronic insomnia can also be used to prevent it. Examples of such treatments include:

- **Sleep Hygiene** – includes lifestyle practices that minimize or prevent sleep difficulties.
- **Behaviour Modification and Relaxation** – clinical studies show that approximately 75% of insomnia sufferers can benefit from behavioural treatment. Examples include: exercising, managing stress through specific strategies, and reducing caffeine use.
- **Medications** – can be beneficial to help alleviate sleep disturbances caused by situational stress, changes in sleep schedules, and to manage some physical or psychological illnesses.
- **Bright Light Therapy** – can be used to help individuals readjust their "biological clock" in cases where sleep difficulties are brought on by shift work, jet lag, or other circumstances where the circadian rhythm is disrupted.
- **Psychotherapy** – can be appropriate if the underlying cause of a person's sleep difficulty is stress, depression, anxiety, or some other psychological illness.



The Canadian Sleep Institute's 10 Commandments for a better sleep

If getting a better night's sleep is your goal, and underlying medical conditions are not an impediment, you may achieve success by following the Ten Commandments of Sleep Hygiene:

1. Schedule a relaxing period before going to sleep, to separate your body and mind from the day's hassles.
2. Use your bedroom primarily for sex and sleep, and not as an all-purpose activity area.
3. Your bed should be comfortable, large enough, in a quiet, dark room, and at the right temperature.
4. Keep a regular schedule, going to bed and getting up at the same time each day. Don't go to bed until you feel sleepy.
5. Be consistent about taking naps. Take one regularly or not at all.
6. Exercise regularly in the morning or early afternoon, but do not engage in strenuous activity late in the evening. A relaxing, mild physical activity might be helpful close to bedtime.
7. Assess your caffeine intake, and avoid caffeine after 2 p.m. Smoking close to bedtime or at night causes further sleep disruption.
8. Don't use alcohol or drugs, such as sedatives. While they might help you initially fall asleep, they lead to sleep disruption and deprive you of deep sleep (at times, even for years).
9. If you feel hungry in the evening, have a light snack or a glass of milk. Heavy meals close to bedtime can result in discomfort and further sleep disturbance.
10. Above all, do not try too hard. If you can't fall asleep, don't lie in bed anxious and frustrated. Leave your bedroom to read, watch T.V. or do something else to relax, going back to bed only when you feel sleepy again.

- Adam Moscovitch, MD, FRCP (C), AASM

The Good News:

Sleep specialists are in a position to properly diagnose and treat insomnia. Patients who seek appropriate diagnosis from a qualified sleep specialist are able to manage their condition and resume a perfectly healthy and normal life. Our specialists at the Canadian Sleep Institute are experienced and well trained in the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of insomnia, along with a host of other sleep disorders. If you feel that you could benefit from seeing a sleep specialist, call us for more information or have your family physician refer you to:

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Canadian Sleep Institute

The Canadian Sleep Institute is a leading centre of excellence in the provision of clinical care, diagnostic services, corporate consulting, clinical research, and education in the area of sleep and fatigue disorders. Our full-service, community-based sleep centre serves a patient population from across Western Canada, and is accredited by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta to assess, diagnose, and treat the full spectrum of over eighty sleep and fatigue disorders.

Our fully qualified team of clinicians, headed by a board-certified sleep physician, is focused on providing comprehensive, coordinated, inter-disciplinary care in the most convenient, accessible, and cost-effective manner available. We feature a state of the art, four-bedroom, overnight sleep diagnostic facility in a comfortable atmosphere and residential hotel-like setting. We also provide a full-service CPAP clinic and follow-up care program for those patients with sleep apnea and related conditions.



Canadian Sleep Institute

Better Health Through Better Sleep

Insomnia

Having trouble
sleeping?
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*Answers to Questions
and information about
Insomnia and Sleep.*

