

Insomnia

I am particularly interested in the treatment of insomnia, as there is strong evidence that a lack of sleep leads to weight problems.¹ As such, especially because insomnia is so very common, I wanted to give you my personal take on it. I will try to do so without writing a whole book, which has already been done many times.

Why does insomnia increase your chance of obesity? We may not know all the reasons, but undoubtedly it is partly because a good night's rest relieves stress (further proof of my Chill Pill philosophy), and partly because you cannot engage in destructive nighttime eating when you are asleep.

Insomnia is more common in women and the older we get, but it is more of a symptom than a disease. It can be caused by excessive use of caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, appetite suppressants, and sedatives. It can also be caused by steroid use, consuming too much food or drink too close to bedtime, and medical conditions like sleep apnea, acid reflux, restless legs syndrome, menopause, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, breathing problems, and situational stress. Therefore it is crucial to treat the underlying cause if there is one.

In turn, insomnia can *cause* stress (and stress eating), fatigue, dizziness, irritability, poor work function, mental sluggishness, illness, and even early death.² The resulting sleepiness and fatigue causes 56,000 *reported* motor vehicle accidents that result in 1500 deaths per year. I can tell you that the days on which I am well rested I am happier, less stressed, and more relaxed, in addition to being a better dad, husband, and even physician.

So how do you treat insomnia? Well, as is the case with weight loss, stressing about it is counterproductive. Chill. Yes, it is important to have what is considered good "sleep hygiene," but approach it methodically, and do what works for you. Some of the following ideas may help:

1. Establish a relaxing nighttime routine, just as you would for an infant who is struggling. Try taking a hot bubble bath while reading a good book and listening to relaxing music.
2. Make your environment more conducive to sleep by setting the thermostat at a comfortable temperature and reducing distracting light and noises.
3. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, and try not to sleep longer than needed (7-8 hours).
4. Try avoiding naps, so you are more tired at night.
5. Exercise regularly. Most sources say not to exercise too vigorously too close to bedtime, but you may find, as I have, that exercising *moderately* right before bedtime actually contributes to a good night's rest.
6. Use your bed only for sleep and intimacy.
7. Listen to relaxing music or to a CD or sound machine that has a variety of relaxing sounds, music, or "white noise."
8. If you are lying in bed and your mind is going 100 miles an hour:
 - a. Try to "erase and replace" your racing thoughts with a song or pleasant memory.
 - b. Think of a three good things that happened that day, *and why they happened*.³
 - c. If you have an idea that you cannot get out of your head, let it go by writing it down, and think of something more relaxing.

- d. A new technique I am recommending that is showing significant promise is a little *mind trick*, to distract you from the thoughts that are distracting you from sleep. Instead of counting directly backwards from 100, as I've heard suggested (which is too easy), count "two steps forward and one step back." In other words, count in this fashion: 100, 98, 99, 97, 98, 96, 97, 95, 96, 94, etc. You'll find you seldom get past 50.
9. To help reduce stress, review Chapter 8, under "What to Do When You Are Stressed."
10. If you have not fallen asleep for more than 30 minutes, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy.

Ideally, try to get a good night's rest without having to rely on a pill. But if all else fails, you may have to take medicine. If you do, do your best not to depend on it too much. I will not go into drugs in great detail, so make sure you research any you try thoroughly before starting. Everyone responds differently to different medicines – you have to find one that works for you, and does not leave you feeling "off" the next day.

My first recommendation is over-the-counter medicine, which is not addicting. Start with diphenhydramine (e.g., Benadryl®), especially if you have a condition that requires an antihistamine. Tylenol® PM (which contains diphenhydramine) is good if you have trouble sleeping because of pain. Melatonin may also help.

Prescription options include low-dose antidepressants that have a side effect of sleepiness, such as trazodone or amitriptyline. These are especially good if your insomnia is due to depression. If due to a muscle strain, try cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril®) or other muscle relaxants. All these are available in generic form.

Chronic use of habit-forming medicines should be avoided. This includes benzodiazepines such as alprazolam (Xanax®) or lorazepam (Ativan®). Newer non-benzodiazepine sedatives such as zolpidem (Ambien®), zaleplon (Sonata®), and eszopiclone (Lunesta®) are approved for longer use, but may be habit-forming and expensive. Therefore, it is not wise to rely on them every night. Of the above medicines, my favorite is eszopiclone, but a common side effect is a bad taste in your mouth.

A promising new medicine is one called ramelteon (Rozerem®). It stimulates melatonin receptors in order to regulate one's circadian rhythm.⁴ It is apparently non-addicting, and my understanding is that it does not reach maximum efficacy unless taken regularly for a few weeks. During this time, it can be taken along with other more addicting sleep aids, in order to wean off of them.

A great "Guide to Healthy Sleep" can be downloaded for free from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), at www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/sleep/healthy_sleep.htm.

¹Lamberg L: Rx for Obesity: Eat Less, Exercise More, and – Maybe – Get More Sleep. *JAMA* 2006;295:2341-2343

²From the website for the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research, accessed November 4, 2006 at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncsdr/patpub/patpub-a.htm>

³Part of a technique developed by Seligman M to achieve happiness; may also help one sleep better, as suggested by Miller CA. Accessed December 10, 2006 at www.breitbart.com/news/2006/11/26/D8LL23V82.html

⁴Cataletto ME: Insomnia, accessed November 4, 2006 from eMedicineHealth, www.emedicinehealth.com/insomnia/page8_em.htm