

Insomnia

The definition of insomnia is not only getting insufficient sleep at night but also that the lack of sleep causes problems during the day. The effects of a lack of sleep usually present as poor concentration, memory and fatigue – not usually as daytime sleepiness. The lack of sleep can come from difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night or too early in the morning and being unable to fall back to sleep again.

While these consequences may seem relatively innocuous there can be more significant consequences if the insomnia continues for many months. A shortened sleep has been shown to have a negative effect on immune function, cardiovascular disease, future depression and metabolic function. So a short sleeper is more likely to be overweight compared to someone who sleeps well.

There are many causes of insomnia but there are different types of insomnia. Acute or short-term insomnia usually occurs due to exposure to a stressful event. In most cases once the stress is over sleep returns to normal. Secondary insomnia can be caused by another disorder such as depression, chronic pain, restless legs syndrome or obstructive sleep apnea. In this type of insomnia the sleep may resolve if the underlying cause is well treated.

Many patients with chronic insomnia, meaning that it has persisted for more than 3 months, have no clear reason for their sleeplessness. They are usually very anxious about their sleep and feel they have no control over this basic function. While it may be tempting to take sleeping tablets these are not an appropriate long term solution. The proven best way to manage chronic insomnia is by working on the behaviours and thoughts around sleep (Cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia – CBT-I) These often include shortening the time in bed which consolidates sleep and not lying in bed trying to sleep more than 15 minutes. Rather get up and do something to distract yourself so the sleepiness comes back. Monitoring sleep using a sleep diary is part of the program. As the sleep improves with these processes the anxiety about sleep resolves.

If you feel you may have insomnia please ask your doctor for a proper assessment and if necessary to send you for CBT-I.