



Diseases and Conditions

Insomnia

Insomnia is a serious disorder, and effective treatment can be crucial to getting the sleep you need. Explore safe, effective, nondrug insomnia treatments.

By [Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Insomnia is a common problem characterized by trouble falling asleep, staying asleep or getting restful sleep, despite the opportunity for adequate sleep. Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia, often called CBT-I, is an effective insomnia treatment for chronic sleep problems.

Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia is a structured program that helps you identify and replace thoughts and behaviors that cause or worsen sleep problems with habits that promote sound sleep. Unlike sleeping pills, CBT-I helps you overcome the underlying causes of your sleep problems.

To make effective changes, it's important to understand sleep cycles and learn how beliefs, behaviors and outside factors can affect your sleep. To help decide how to best treat your insomnia, your sleep therapist may have you keep a detailed sleep diary for one to two weeks.

Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia aims to improve sleep habits and behaviors. The cognitive part of CBT-I teaches you to recognize and change beliefs that affect your ability to sleep. For instance, this may include learning how to control or eliminate negative thoughts and worries that keep you awake. The behavioral part of CBT-I helps you develop good sleep habits and avoid behaviors that keep you from sleeping well.

Depending on your needs, your sleep therapist may recommend some of these CBT-I techniques:

- **Stimulus control therapy.** This method helps remove factors that condition the mind to resist sleep. For example, you might be coached to set a consistent bedtime and wake time and avoid naps, use the bed only for sleep and sex, and leave the bedroom if you can't go to sleep within 20 minutes, only returning when you're sleepy.

- **Sleep restriction.** Lying in bed when you're awake can become a habit that leads to poor sleep. This treatment decreases the time you spend in bed, causing partial sleep deprivation, which makes you more tired the next night. Once your sleep has improved, your time in bed is gradually increased.
- **Sleep hygiene.** This method of therapy involves changing basic lifestyle habits that influence sleep, such as smoking or drinking too much caffeine late in the day, drinking too much alcohol, or not getting regular exercise. It also includes tips that help you sleep better, such as ways to wind down an hour or two before bedtime.
- **Sleep environment improvement.** This offers ways that you can create a comfortable sleep environment, such as keeping your bedroom quiet, dark and cool, not having a TV in the bedroom, and hiding the clock from view.
- **Relaxation training.** This method helps you calm your mind and body. Approaches include meditation, imagery, muscle relaxation and others.
- **Remaining passively awake.** Also called paradoxical intention, this involves avoiding any effort to fall asleep. Paradoxically, worrying that you can't sleep can actually keep you awake. Letting go of this worry can help you relax and make it easier to fall asleep.
- **Biofeedback.** This method allows you to observe biological signs such as heart rate and muscle tension and shows you how to adjust them. Your sleep specialist may have you take a biofeedback device home to record your daily patterns. This information can help identify patterns that affect sleep.

The most effective treatment approach may combine several of these methods.

Sleep medications can be an effective short-term treatment — for example, they can provide immediate relief during a period of high stress or grief. Some newer sleeping medications have been approved for long-term use. But they may not be the best long-term insomnia treatment.

Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia may be a good treatment choice if you have long-term sleep problems. You may want to try it if you're worried about becoming dependent on sleep medications, if medications aren't effective or if they cause bothersome side effects.

Unlike pills, CBT-I addresses the underlying causes of insomnia rather than just relieving symptoms. But it takes time — and effort — to make it work. In some cases, a combination of sleep medication and CBT-I may be the best approach.

Insomnia is linked to a number of physical and mental health disorders and substance abuse. Ongoing lack of sleep increases your risk of illness and infection, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and chronic pain. Some medications also can contribute to insomnia.

If you have a condition or medication that's linked to insomnia, talk to your doctor about how best to manage these along with sleep problems. Insomnia is unlikely to get better without treatment.

There are a limited number of certified Behavioral Sleep Medicine specialists, and you may not live near a practitioner. You may have to do some searching to find a trained practitioner and a treatment schedule and type that fit your needs. Here are some places to look:

- The American Academy of Sleep Medicine website allows you to search for a certified sleep center, such as the Mayo Clinic Center for Sleep Medicine, when you click on Patient Health Information.
- The Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine offers a directory for finding a Behavioral Sleep Medicine provider.
- The National Sleep Foundation website offers information about finding a sleep professional. Many are associated with major hospitals.
- The American Board of Sleep Medicine offers information about Behavioral Sleep Medicine specialists on its website.

The type of treatment — such as group versus individual — and frequency of sessions can vary, depending on whom you see. You may need as few as two sessions or as many as eight or more sessions, depending on your sleep expert, the program and your progress.

When calling to set up an appointment, ask the practitioner about his or her approach and what to expect. It's also a good idea to check ahead of time whether your health insurance will cover the type of treatment you need.

Books, CDs or websites on cognitive behavioral therapy techniques and insomnia may be beneficial, but they can't replace meeting with a sleep medicine specialist in person.

Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia can benefit nearly anyone with sleep problems. For example, the therapy can help older adults who have been taking sleep medications for years, people with physical problems such as chronic pain and those with primary insomnia. What's more, the effects seem to last. There is no evidence that CBT-I has negative side effects.

CBT-I requires steady practice, and some approaches may cause you to lose sleep at first. But stick with it, and you'll likely see lasting results.

References

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