



‘Insomnia is a gross feeder. It will nourish itself on any kind of thinking, including thinking about not thinking.’
(Clifton Fadiman)

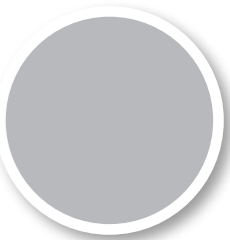
TYPES OF INSOMNIA

Definitions vary, but broadly speaking insomnia can be classified into two main categories: onset insomnia and maintenance insomnia. In onset-type insomnia, a person will have difficulty falling asleep. Active thoughts, anxiety, and/or physical problems such as pain or restless legs may prevent the process of shutting down and relaxing into sleep. This pattern corresponds approximately with the traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) ‘heart’ or Shen disturbance pattern of insomnia.²


In maintenance-type insomnia, a person will generally get off to sleep all right, but will wake up shortly afterwards or in the early hours of the morning and not be able to fall asleep again, or experience a restless, shallow sleep for the remainder of the night. In simplified terms this corresponds to the TCM ‘kidney’/ adrenal pattern of insomnia,² a pattern that frequently occurs in perimenopausal women.

TREATMENT OF INSOMNIA

In TCM, insomnia is said to be due to a deficiency of blood and/or Yin, leading to a relative Yang excess, and the Yang is unable to enter the Yin, i.e. the active is incapable of becoming passive. This can affect other TCM organ systems. The diagnosis is sophisticated and needs to be done by a TCM physician so that the patient can be treated with the appropriate herbs, food or acupuncture.³ There are many wonderful sedation points in acupuncture, and it can make for a most effective treatment for insomnia on its own.



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 With up to 10% of people suffering from chronic insomnia and around 50% of us having serious sleeplessness at some point in our lives, insomnia is an extremely common problem. However, the degree to which it can affect our health and disturb our lives is often underrated.¹

Anyone who has experienced bouts of sleeplessness knows how rapidly general fatigue, weakness, difficulty in concentrating, mood changes, poor immunity and many other problems can set in. Insomnia can rapidly ruin your waking life. Many patients, and indeed many practitioners, underestimate its seriousness. If you are suffering from sleeplessness, see a professional for a thorough assessment and personalised treatment. Remember that insomnia can be a symptom of another problem such as an overactive thyroid, depression, or heart, lung or nervous system disease and should not be ignored.

Sleeplessness

‘Sleeplessness is a desert without vegetation or inhabitants.’

(Jessamyn West)

From an Ayurvedic perspective, both types may be thought of as excess Vata states. Excess 'air' and 'ether' elements are present, leading to dryness, lightness, variability, mobility and coldness – all the qualities least conducive to restful sleep. Ayurvedic physicians may therefore treat insomnia with foods and herbs that are moist, warm, heavy and stable⁴ to reduce Vata and engender the qualities that are characteristic of good sleep. A simple example of this would be the practice of rubbing warm sesame seed oil on the feet at bedtime – an easy self-help technique that often helps.

‘Rubbing warm sesame seed oil on the feet at bedtime often helps’

Western medical herbalists (called phytotherapists in South Africa) would usually approach the treatment of insomnia in a holistic person-centred way. Different rationales are used, but they would generally prescribe herbs to nourish and balance the nervous system (called nervines), such as *Avena sativa* (oats) or *Scutellaria lateriflora* (scullcap), or sleep-inducing herbs (hypnotics) such as *Valeriana officinalis* (valerian) or *Passiflora incarnata* (passionflower). Not all herbs are suitable for everyone, so treatment needs to be individualised. Valerian, for example, although widely available over the counter, is considered 'hot' in nature and may aggravate sleeplessness in individuals who are also heated in their temperament or physical symptoms.⁵

Homeopathic medicine has long realised that there are as many different types of insomnia as there are insomniacs! Homeopaths consequently take a very thorough case history and look not only at the exact pattern of the insomnia but at the context within which the symptoms occur. This allows them to select from the more than 540 known medicines for insomnia in homeopathy. While self-prescribed *Coffea*, *Arsenicum* or *Lycopodium* or a homeopathic complex medicine, e.g. from *Natura* or *Heel*, may help some, it should never replace the more sophisticated and deeper-acting medicines that can be prescribed for you by your homeopath.

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF

The best advice is to see a competent, registered practitioner and get individualised treatment for your sleeplessness. Remember

that there may be more to the insomnia than meets the eye and it may be most appropriate to prioritise treatment of underlying health problems, some of which can be serious.

Simple insomnia may be helped by trying the following for a limited period of time – but make sure you seek professional help if there is no improvement in your sleep.

- Have a sleep routine.
- Make sure your bedroom is free of distractions and is comfortable, cool and quiet.
- Rub warm sesame oil on your feet at bedtime.
- Avoid caffeine-containing or other stimulating drinks after midday.
- Expose yourself to bright early morning sunlight, unfiltered by a window, glasses or contact lenses (this helps the pineal gland



Homeopathic medicines should be taken in a 6 cH or 30 cH potency, at bedtime, for no longer than a week. If they have not helped in that time, they are not suitable for you and you should stop taking them and consult a homeopath who is a member of the Homeopathic Association of SA (www.hsa.org.za).

and melatonin secretion).

- Take a good-quality vitamin B complex in the mornings.
- Take a calcium-magnesium supplement at night. Many medicines in the TCM treatment of insomnia are heavy, e.g. oyster shell – they ‘weigh down the Shen’. Calmag supplements may play a similar role, but they are certainly helpful for healthy nervous system function.
- 5-HTP or its precursor amino acid tryptophan helps many people to sleep better if taken at bedtime.
- Melatonin supplements may help the elderly and blind to sleep better, but are best taken under supervision.
- Herbs that may be helpful include plants from the mint family such as Scutellaria, Melissa (lemon balm), Stachys (betony) and lavender, which have a well-deserved reputation for calming and soothing excitement in the nervous system.
- Chamomile tea may be helpful, particularly if the person is irritable or fractious or also has digestive problems.
- A favourite of mine is the famous tonic herb *Withania somniferum* (ashwagandha) – its Latin name says it all! Best taken in powder form mixed into warm milk at bedtime.
- For onset-type insomnia, try the

homeopathic medicines *Coffea* or *Tela aranea* – the former particularly if strong positive emotions or excitement have brought on the insomnia.

- For maintenance-type insomnia, try *Arsenicum album* if the person wakes between midnight and 02h00 with restlessness and anxiety, or *Lycopodium clavatum* if the person wakes later, between 04h00 and 08h00.

[There is help out there for your sleeplessness. Insomnia is a very common problem and there is no need to suffer in silence. Try some simple self-help measures and seek professional help if these don't help you. Sleep is so vitally important to our bodies for rest and repairs and all aspects of our mental and physical health that everything possible should be done to ensure we benefit from this magical state. ●

*'Sleep that knits up the
ravelled sleeve of care
The death of each day's life,
sore labour's bath
Balm of hurt minds, great
nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.'*

(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

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