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## TREATING INSOMNIA NATURALLY

Insomnia is a very common complaint. It affects 30% of the North American population within the course of a year, while roughly 10% of the adult population has chronic insomnia. Sleep is absolutely essential to both the health of the body and mind. The amount of sleep required varies from one person to the next, but most adults need a minimum of 7-9 hours a night. The benefits of sleep are multi-factorial: the immune system is stimulated, the nervous system is regenerated, and growth hormone (an anti-aging hormone) is secreted causing liver regeneration, muscle building, and breakdown of fat stores.

There are two types of insomnia: sleep-onset insomnia (difficulty falling asleep) and sleep-maintenance insomnia (difficulty staying asleep). There are a variety of causes of insomnia, both psychological and physiological, and these causes can be explored by a naturopathic doctor.

Diet is the first thing to be considered. A common cause of insomnia is low nocturnal sugar levels (hypoglycemia) which leads to the release of cortisol and epinephrine at night, leading to excitement of the nervous system and frequent night-time waking. Eating a protein and complex carbohydrate snack before bed (almond butter and a rice cake) can help balance sugar levels.

Avoiding refined sugars during the day and before bed is also important. Stimulants throughout the day should be avoided (ie. coffee, black tea, chocolate). As well, certain drugs can interfere with sleep, including thyroid drugs (especially if taken too close before bed), oral contraceptives, Beta-blockers, marijuana (by interfering with dopamine levels), and alcohol (although it may help you initially fall asleep, it prevents the deeper REM dream state of sleep). It is important also to avoid drinking water or other fluids after 7pm to avoid nocturnal urination. If you suffer from sleep apnea (a breathing disorder characterized by brief interruptions of sleep and heavy snoring) you may benefit from a weight loss program and avoidance of alcohol. Sleep apnea must be diagnosed by an MD sleep specialist. If you suffer from restless legs at night, you would most definitely benefit from B12 and folic acid shots, which may be performed by a naturopathic doctor.

Supplementation of vitamins and minerals will often improve sleep for certain individuals. Those with low melatonin status (common in the elderly) can benefit from melatonin supplementation. This is a hormone naturally secreted by our pineal gland that puts the body into a deep state of sleep. Almost everyone can benefit from magnesium supplementation before bed to calm the nervous system and relax tense muscles. This mineral is often deficient in our diets and can be found in green leafy vegetables like kale, swiss chard, and romaine lettuce. For those unable to sleep due to high stress levels, I commonly prescribe Relora (a combination formula of the herbs *Magnolia officinalis* and *Phellodendron amurense*) which helps lower cortisol levels. Also, 5-HTP, the precursor for serotonin, can help promote and maintain sleep. Herbs such as valerian, passion flower, chamomile, and hops are also helpful for calming the nervous system before bed.

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Lifestyle factors to help improve sleep include:

- Exercise regularly, but make sure you time it at least 4 hours before bed.
- Establish a routine by going to bed at the same time every night even on the weekends.
- If you have worries, write them down before going to bed to get them off your mind enough to “let go” and drop off to sleep.
- Stop TV and online computer activity at least 30-60 minutes prior to bedtime. Both of these generate huge amounts of electromagnetic radiation that upsets the natural biorhythms of the body. Make sure any electrical things, such as clock radios, are at least 1-2 feet from your head while sleeping.

Also, acupuncture and Bowen Therapy are treatments which can help balance the nervous system and improve stress-related insomnia symptoms.

There is no need to continue feeling fatigued and miserable. Naturopathic treatment is an effective way to treat insomnia, without having to take sleep medications with addictive properties and side effects.