

## Non- Drug Treatments for Insomnia are Preferable

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### Insomnia

A recent survey found that 10 percent of young adults had used non-prescription medications and 13 percent had used alcohol within the past year to improve sleep. Add this to the two percent of the population who take prescription sedatives and you can see that drug use for insomnia is alarmingly prevalent. Prescription sedatives are at least to some degree addictive and may cause withdrawal symptoms. They may also contribute to depression, to daytime drowsiness, to balance problems, particularly in the elderly, and significantly affect daytime mental alertness. Even non-prescription drugs can have some of these undesirable side effects, though usually not as severe. Are there alternatives to taking a sleeping pill? As we mentioned in our last Being Well column, sleep disturbances may be caused by some other underlying medical or psychological disorder, such as depression, anxiety, alcoholism or other substance abuse, hyperthyroidism, bipolar disorder, and disorders of breathing. These conditions should of course be treated first in order to relieve the sleep disturbance. Caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and some prescription and non-prescription drugs may cause insomnia and should be eliminated. Before you consider using drugs to relieve sleep disturbance, try these simple steps to improve your chances of a better night's sleep. 1) Avoid or at least decrease the use of caffeine, especially after noon. 2) Do not use alcohol for at least 4 hours or tobacco for at least 2 hours prior to bedtime. 3) Don't eat a heavy meal within two to three hours before going to bed; this also helps to avoid heartburn which can contribute to wakefulness. 4) Try to stick to a regular schedule for going to bed and awakening. Avoid long naps during the day, though a short afternoon nap probably won't have any effect. 5) Exercise daily, but avoid vigorous exercise within three or four hours of bedtime. 6) Be sure the bedroom is cool, well ventilated dark and quiet. Many insomniacs after a few sleepless nights will begin to associate the bed with wakefulness. This conditioned response is best treated with "stimulus control therapy" and might be worth trying before considering medication. 1) Use the bed only for sleep or sex, not for reading, television, eating, telephone, etc. 2) Go to bed only when sleepy. 3) If you do not fall asleep within 20 minutes, leave the bedroom; return to bed only when sleepy. 4) Repeat step 3 as many times as necessary until sleep occurs within 15-20 minutes. 5) If you awaken before your planned arising time, repeat step 3. 6) Get up at the same time each day, regardless of how much or little you slept. 7) Don't nap during the day, and sleep only in your own bed. As with many other disorders, medication is a last resort. Over-the-counter sleeping preparations are usually antihistamines and are used because drowsiness is one of their side effects. Melatonin has become very popular for sleep in recent years, and is often effective for sleep problems associated with shift work or jet lag; long term use has not been shown to be safe, even though it is considered a "natural" substance. Valarian root extract is also gaining popularity, though little is known about how it works, its long term risks or interactions with other drugs. Finally, prescription sedatives can be used in the most severe cases; I usually restrict them in my practice to patients who are otherwise ill and whose health is threatened by lack of sleep, or those who are suffering an emotional crisis. Both short and long-term ill effects of these drugs in my opinion outweigh their potential benefits in most cases. My personal cure to not sleeping well is to get a little more serious about my exercise program, get some projects completed that have been

weighing on me, try to mend any relationships that need mending, and get back to some recreational reading. I know that insomnia is often much more complex than that however, and may require a visit to a health care provider. Remember that sleep is as vital to good health as eating and exercise, and sleep problems shouldn't be ignored.