

# marie claire

## Why we can't sleep

Sometimes talking about insomnia can cause such anxiety that even the word equates to someone saying 'Voldemort.' But, the fact is, we as a world are *not* getting enough sleep – and it's time to do something about it. We try to dissect what insomnia is exactly...

### Early insomnia

'You are not alone is suffering from insomnia. Tens of thousands have this problem. It's usually acute because you have a stressful problem in your life and worry is causing your sleep to be affected.' The good news is that this usually passes.

### Chronic insomnia

However, if you've had ongoing poor sleep issues for years then you are suffering from chronic insomnia.

## Insomnia causes

### Our brain

'There are a couple of parts of our brain that control our sleep and regulate it,' explains Dr Helen Nightingale. 'The cortex, which is the 'thinking' brain and the subcortical – the 'animal' brain – which is responsible for keeping us protected while we sleep. For example if you're a mum and you're currently in a deep sleep, you'll immediately wake up if you hear your child crying, or you'll wake up if you need the toilet. When the cortex shuts down it transfers control to the limbic system, which is concerned with instinct and mood. It controls the basic emotions and drives. Our objective is to quieten the cortex and avoid worrying. The cortex needs to go quiet so that the subcortical can work. People who have been good sleepers can start having problems when their brain actively focusses on unimportant negative thoughts.'

### Our anxiety

'Usually it is anxiety that disrupts our sleep and that is related to thoughts that interrupt us during periods of light sleep during the night if we have worries during this time. Everyone's own pattern of sleep will vary and some need more than others. And it also depends on age and our personal sleep patterns both across the night and also the week. There are also chemicals that can change our sleep most importantly alcohol, and medications. So sleep is a complex issue. One important point to remember is about real sleep. Sometimes we think we have not slept a wink, but this is actually not true (paradoxical sleep) we feel as if we have not slept. But indeed we have.'

## Insomnia cures

### Keep a sleep diary

'First of all start a sleep diary for a couple of weeks to monitor it,' Dr Helen Nightingale recommends. 'This should include time to bed, time you fell asleep and then time you first wake up and the number of disturbances through the night. It is also helpful to record the quality of sleep. Use a scale of 1-10 and then rate the sleep. Also record the time you wake up in the morning and the time you actually got out of bed. Try to record this quite accurately, but don't do it until the morning, (it's not a good idea to be turning on the light and writing things down during the night.)

### Have a sleep-friendly environment

'Now you may start trying to set up situations that will increase the chances of having a better nights sleep.

There are a number of main factors you should consider:

The environment that you sleep in, the temperature and the conditions that you are sleeping in all affect you. Avoid alcohol and have a wind-down period between eating and watching TV. Allow yourself an hour before bedtime with no phone, no TV, no tablets, etc. And, you need to take a peaceful approach to going to sleep. Your bedroom should be dark, without noise.

'As worrying is a key factor, try practicing mindfulness, meditation and especially transcendental meditation, which is always very good for calming you down when you do something or experience something that de-regulates you, such as your partner leaving you or a family death.

'I'd also recommend reading 'Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems: A Self-Help Guide Using Cognitive Behavioral Techniques' by Colin Espie. I also use the Alpha-Stim cranial electrotherapy simulation device as an assistant to a comprehensive protocol for sleep as part of a good cognitive behavioural therapy programme. The Alpha-Stim is used as an adjunct to enable my patients to start re-aligning their system. It calms them down with the alpha waves. It's a good preparation for getting the brain back into kilter,' says Dr Helen Nightingale.

Now, remember next time you find yourself unable to sleep that you are not alone and more often than not, your insomnia is just temporary and you'll be sound asleep again soon enough.