

# Natural Sleep Solutions

WebMD Feature

By Elizabeth Shimer Bowers

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In our 24/7 society, far too many Americans see sleep as a luxury rather than a necessity. We have no problem spending long hours at work and then adding other activities on top of it. Something's got to give, so we delay our mental and physical recharge and skimp on sleep. When we finally do lie down, our busy minds aren't always so willing to rest.

“Insomnia is a complex condition often caused by a number of factors,” says Qanta Ahmed, MD, a sleep specialist at the Winthrop-University Hospital Sleep Disorders Center in Mineola, N.Y. “Addressing those factors often requires lifestyle and environmental changes.”

No matter what its cause, insomnia is the most common sleep complaint among Americans. According to the National Sleep Foundation, 30% to 40% of adults say they have occasional insomnia. And 10% to 15% of Americans say they have trouble sleeping all the time.

When insomnia strikes, one option is to try prescription sleep aids. But several natural sleep remedies might help you, too. Lifestyle changes, as well as foods, supplements, and herbs may help you get restful sleep.

Try these when you've counted your last sheep.

## Natural Insomnia Remedies: Foods, Herbs, and Supplements

**Melatonin** is a hormone that helps regulate the sleep/wake cycle, an internal pacemaker that controls the timing and our drive for sleep. It causes drowsiness, lowers body temperature, and puts the body into sleep mode.

Research on melatonin in people with insomnia is mixed. Some research shows that taking it restores and improves sleep in people with insomnia. Other studies show that melatonin does not help people with insomnia stay asleep.

Melatonin might be of benefit to people with issues such as jet lag or shift work. It is not regulated by the FDA and can have problems with purity. You should only use it under close supervision by a doctor.

**Warm milk.** You can put a tasty spin on your grandmother's natural insomnia remedy by sipping warm milk before bed. Almond milk is an excellent source of calcium, which helps the brain make melatonin. Plus, warm milk may spark pleasant and relaxing memories of your mother helping you fall asleep.

**Sleepy-time snacks.** The best sleep-inducing foods include a combination of protein and carbohydrates, says Shelby Harris, PsyD. She's the director of the behavioral sleep medicine program at the Sleep-Wake Disorders Center at Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, N.Y.

Harris suggests a light snack of half a banana with a tablespoon of peanut butter, or a whole wheat cracker with some cheese. Eat one of these snacks about 30 minutes before hitting the hay.

**Magnesium** apparently plays a key role with sleep. Research has shown that even a marginal lack of it can prevent the brain from settling down at night. You can get magnesium from food. Good sources include green leafy vegetables, wheat germ, pumpkin seeds, and almonds. Check with your doctor before taking magnesium supplements. Magnesium can interact with many different medications, and too much of it can cause serious health issues.

**Lavender.** Lavender oil is calming and can help encourage sleep in some people with insomnia, research shows. “Try taking a hot bath with lavender oil before bed to relax your body and mind,” Harris says.

**Valerian root.** This medicinal herb has been used to treat sleep problems since ancient times. “Valerian can be sedating and may help you fall asleep,” says Tracey Marks, MD, an Atlanta-based psychiatrist.

Research on the effectiveness of valerian for insomnia is mixed. Marks says if you try valerian as a sleep remedy, be patient. It can take a few weeks for it to take effect. Talk to your doctor before taking valerian and follow label directions.

**L-theanine.** This amino acid found in green tea leaves may help combat anxiety that interferes with sleep. A 2007 study showed that L-theanine reduced heart rate and immune responses to stress. It's thought to work by boosting the amount of a feel-good hormone your body makes. It also induces brain waves linked to relaxation. Talk to your doctor before taking it.

## **Natural Sleep Remedies: Lifestyle Changes**

The following changes to your lifestyle and environment can also help you combat sleep problems:

**Turn off the TV.** In some people, nighttime light can hinder melatonin and create “social jetlag,” which mimics symptoms of having traveled several time zones. To keep your sleep surroundings as dark as possible, Ahmed recommends moving the TV out of your bedroom and using a DVR or TiVo to record favorite late-night shows for later viewing.

**Put other appliances to bed, too.** If you want a good, restful sleep, turn your appliances away from your bed. Or better yet, turn them off altogether. If you must use bedroom electronics, choose those illuminated with red light, which is better for sleep than blue light.

**Give it up.** If you don't fall asleep within 30 minutes, sleep specialists recommend you get up and leave your bedroom or read. Then return to your bed to sleep when you feel tired again.

**Exercise early.** It's no secret that exercise improves sleep and overall health. But a study published in the journal *Sleep* shows that the amount of exercise and time of day it is done makes a difference. Researchers found that women who exercised at a moderate intensity for at least 30 minutes each morning, 7 days a week, had less trouble sleeping than women who exercised less or later in the day. Morning exercise seems to affect body rhythms that affect sleep quality.

One of the reasons for this interplay between exercise and sleep may be body temperature. Your body temp rises during exercise and takes up to 6 hours to drop back down to normal. Because cooler body temperatures are linked to better sleep, it's important to give your body time to cool off before bed.

**Keep your slumber surroundings tranquil.** Your bedroom should feel like a sanctuary. Piles of clothes thrown on your bed, stacks of bills staring at you, or other random clutter will hamper you emotionally and may lead to sleep problems. A tranquil and organized space will help you feel more relaxed. To create the perfect sleep environment, try the following:

- Wear pajamas to bed. This can be your birthday suit, but it signals your mind that it's bedtime.
- Don't let your bedroom get too hot or too cold. Sleep can be disrupted at temperatures below 54 F or above 72 F.
- Make your room dark. Consider installing room-darkening shades. Or wear eye covers to block light from the street or LED displays.
- Buy a good mattress. You spend 1/3 of your life in your bed, so it's worth the investment.
- Use a pillow that supports your head and neck. Give the pillow the bend test: If you bend it in half and it stays in position, it's too floppy.
- To filter unwanted sounds, use a white noise machine. Your brain still hears things when you sleep.
- Sleep on breathable linens. They will reduce sweat, body odor, and skin irritation, all of which can disrupt sleep.

Natural sleep remedies can do wonders for the occasional bout of poor sleep. They shouldn't be used for chronic sleep problems, though, Harris says. If you have insomnia that lasts for a few weeks or more, talk to your doctor

SOURCES:

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Shelby Harris, PsyD, C.BSM, director of the behavioral sleep medicine program at the Sleep-Wake Disorders Center at Montefiore Medical Center in Bronx, New York.  
Tracey Marks, MD, Atlanta-based psychiatrist and psychotherapist specializing in the interplay between mind and body and author of *Master Your Sleep: Proven Methods Simplified*.  
Myron Wentz, PhD, microbiologist, immunologist, founder of Sanoviv Medical Institute, and author of *The Healthy Home*.  
Sally Kravitch, M.S., holistic nutrition & C.N.H.P and author of *Vibrant Living*.  
Carolyn Dean, MD, ND, medical director of the non-profit Nutritional Magnesium Association.  
Lise N. Alschuler, ND, FABNO, naturopathic physician with Board certification in naturopathic oncology, and co-author of *The Definitive Guide to Cancer: An Integrative Approach to Prevention, Treatment, and Healing*.  
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