



### To Sleep or not to Sleep

Sleep is essential for mind and body. The amount of sleep needed varies from person to person and tends to decrease with age. A five-year-old, for instance, needs about twelve hours, whereas an adult only really needs about seven or eight. One thing is certain no matter what the age, poor quality or lack of sleep can result in a number of problems, both emotional and physical. Depression, muscle aches and pains and headaches are all common problems for the insomniac.

As people get older they can lose the ability to stay asleep for prolonged periods; this is often made worse by problems such as stress. This occurs because as we get older, and become stressed, the brain produces less serotonin and melatonin -chemicals which are needed for mood stability and good sleep patterns.

### Diet and Lifestyle

Alcohol also reduces serotonin. Despite many regarding it as something to help them relax, it will in the long run have a negative impact on the amount of good quality rest had each night. Reducing alcohol and addressing any stress is therefore essential to ensure a decent amount of sleep.

Other diet and lifestyle factors can reduce the ability to get a good night's rest. It is important to try to eliminate stimulants such as caffeine from the diet. This includes not just the obvious culprit - coffee - but also cola, chocolate and tea. The biscuit before bed is a foe rather than a friend. A sugary snack causes blood sugar levels initially to surge and then fall. This fall will result in the release of hormones, which stimulate the brain to wake you up to eat. Better snacks to have, to keep blood sugar levels stable, would be cereal or toast.

Also, whilst it might sound obvious, it is sensible to go to bed when tired. The body goes through adrenalin cycles every hundred minutes. At the low point in the cycle we are sleepier. If we fight sleep to stay up and watch the end of a film, for instance, this can result in us going to bed at a higher point in the cycle, when we are more wakeful, which makes getting to sleep that much harder.

Exercise is known to help improve sleep quality. It should not be performed just before going to bed, as this will tend to wake you up; better times are the morning or early evening. It should be of moderate, not high intensity - you don't have to knock yourself out! Walking, cycling or swimming for twenty minutes, up to three times a week should see a vast improvement in many people's sleep cycles.



### Information Sheet – Insomnia

These recommendations are often all that is needed. If additional help is required then there are a number of herbal remedies that offer support. The great thing about using herbal remedies instead of normal sleeping tablets is that they can give excellent results without addiction or a 'hangover' feeling in the morning.

#### Herbs can Help

These herbs can also be used to help combat one of the other causes of sleep problems - stress. If a person is under pressure they often suffer from muscle tension and an inability to relax, which will of course result in difficulties in getting to or staying asleep.

Valerian has been used for many years to help relieve stress and insomnia. It has been found to have a relaxant effect on the muscles and helps to calm the central nervous system. This will reduce anxiety and tension. It may be used at a lower dose during the day-time to help deal with the pressures work or life may bring. A larger single dose can be used at night to make slipping off to sleep, and staying there, much easier. This herb is as effective as many conventional tranquillisers, but it works without the side effects of addiction, poor coordination and interaction with alcohol, which can be associated with conventional medicine.

If Valerian alone is not enough to help the chronic insomnia sufferer, it could also be taken mixed with Hops.

Hops are known to have a mild sedative action, helping to reduce restlessness, excitability, tension and therefore sleep problems. Taken in conjunction with Valerian they offer an extremely effective remedy.

#### Why tinctures?

When taking these remedies it is often preferable to try them in tincture (liquid) form. This is because it can take a tablet up to two hours to get into the system and start working. The tincture format will be absorbed and working within twenty minutes, due to the alcohol base. Alcohol is absorbed very quickly and easily by the body, and will take the herbs into the system with it. It is not the same as having an alcoholic drink like a beer though, as the amount of alcohol you get is about the same as the amount present in a banana.

Because tinctures are absorbed so quickly and easily they are also very helpful for those people who get to sleep easily but tend to wake in the night. If this is the case, then one dose can be taken before bed and another dose in the middle of the night upon waking.



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#### Keep Calm

Another way that stress can impact upon sleep is to create an overactive mind. The body is ready to unwind at the end of the day, but that brain just will not switch off, full of constant thoughts of what has happened today and what must be done tomorrow.

A herb which has been found to be very helpful for this is Passiflora which helps to calm brain activity as well as having a relaxant effect on the muscles, aiding the brain to switch off from the worries of the day and making relaxation and sleep more of a possibility. Again this herb can be used at low doses during the day and a single higher dose at night. As with Valerian and Hops, the tincture format will give faster absorption and therefore faster action.

These herbs are all very effective and, taken alongside the lifestyle and dietary factors already mentioned, can have a positive effect on sleep, which will make functioning both physically and emotionally much easier. However, they are not always going to give an instant fix. It may take up to a week, depending on how long the problem has been going on, to see full improvement. So, no matter how tired and stressed you may feel, please have patience and give it time for it to work for you.

Of course Reflexology can help with this problem – please contact me to make an appointment or just to discuss your situation.