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Awake in the night? How to beat insomnia without medication



Well, according to the latest global stats, you're not alone. Vogue asks the experts the best ways to beat insomnia, for a restful night's sleep without resorting to medication.

It's 3am. You've been wide awake for hours. And there's only **a few hours to go before your alarm (<https://www.vogue.com.au/vogue-codes/news/wellness-advice-from-a-news-anchor-with-a-daily-2-am-alarm/news-story/a1a049584e12e3493010788d8c2ec4c5>)**. As the minutes pass, the anxiety rises. Is anyone else out there struggling to beat insomnia?

Well, according to a recent **global survey (<https://www.philips.com/aw/about/news/archive/standard/news/press/2019/20190307-in-recognition-of-world-sleep-day-philips-presents-its-annual-global-sleep-survey-results.html>)**, you're definitely not alone. Eight in 10 adults wish they could sleep better, but 60 per cent of those also admit to never actually taking steps to improve the quality of their sleep. The **National Institutes of Health (<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/files/docs/ncsdr/201101011NationalSleepDisordersResearch7820.pdf>)** reports that up to 30 per cent of Americans suffer sleep disruption, and that women are most prone to insomnia, linked to high levels of anxiety. And for the most up to date statistics on **how we all slept last night (<https://www.vogue.com.au/beauty/wellbeing/are-you-getting-too-much-sleep/image-gallery/9e5fd92394bd9174bb005bab8490b4fc>)**, sleep tracking app **Sleep Cycle (<https://www.sleepcycle.com/>)** – with millions of users around the world – reports on the average “best” and “worst” sleep quality, from New Zealand (currently top) to Japan (currently lowest).

Finding a solution is what most of the 3am-club are Googling. And while medication (such as Sonata, Ambien and Lunesta, to name just a few) might be top of the search, according to Dr Matthew Walker, professor of neuroscience and psychology at the University of California, Berkeley and author of *Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams*, pills should be a last resort.

“Sleeping medications have been associated with a significantly higher risk of death, plus they don’t typically outperform a placebo by very much,” he says. As a result of the increasingly apparent health risk relating to sedative drugs, this year, the FDA mandated that certain prescription insomnia drugs must carry a warning highlighting their **harmful potential** (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2019/05/02/fda-here-are-the-new-warnings-about-sleeping-pills-like-ambien-lunesta-sonata/#5965942a693e>).

So, with medication off the table, *Vogue* asks the experts what the best options are to help beat insomnia.

Does reducing anxiety help to improve sleep?

“Women are almost twice as likely to suffer from anxiety disorders than men and they are much more likely to suffer insomnia,” explains Walker. “The fight-or-flight branch of the nervous system is switched on [when you are anxious], which results in higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol. So it’s reasonable to assume higher levels of anxiety make women predisposed to sleep-related problems.”

Managing your cortisol levels may be key to improving your sleep. LA-based naturopathic doctor Dr Nigma Talib explains, “If your cortisol is imbalanced, you will not only find it difficult to drop off, but you will also wake in the early hours between 2am and 4am. Consistently poor sleep leaves you feeling hungover and can even exacerbate hormonal imbalances, heightening PMT and menopausal symptoms.” She suggests taking a B-complex supplement such as Dr Nigma Talib B Famous capsules which, she says, “help to bring your cortisol levels into alignment”.

If the day’s anxieties play over in your mind, a herbal supplement may help to instil calm. Various trials have shown lavender essential oil can, in some cases, be as effective as SSRIs, a common class of antidepressants used to treat anxiety disorders. Researchers believe the lavender oil calms nerve cells and neurotransmitter activity in the brain. Try Kalms Lavender One-A-Day Capsules, which contain 80mg of lavender oil.

How can you quieten an overactive mind?

While you *should* be emptying your mind and settling in for deep sleep, your brain often has other ideas, instead fixating on never-ending to-do lists or the Netflix series you binged before bed. Various studies show that white noise – or more specifically, non-disruptive, soothing

sounds that effectively block out or mask more jarring noises – can help to improve sleep. Find white noise playlists on YouTube or Spotify.

Alternatively, for something a little more pleasing to the ear, the album *Sleep* by composer Max Richter plays eight hours of calming classical music that coerces the brain into sleep. Richter calls his night-long musical masterpiece, “my personal lullaby for a frenetic world”. It is undeniably hypnotic and I defy anyone *not* to fall into a peaceful sleep while listening to it.

If it’s a snoring partner rather than your own thoughts that are keeping you awake, however, different measures need to be taken. “Sleep apnoea – or heavy snoring – is far more common in men,” says Walker. In this case, Bose’s noise-masking Sleepbuds could be a worthwhile investment: not to be confused with headphones, these comfortable earbuds come pre-loaded with sleep tracks that mirror the frequency of snoring (and other disruptive night-time noises), which allows your mind to skip over the sound.

What helps to aid relaxation before sleep?

Cannabidiol (CBD) is fast becoming an aid for a whole host of everyday issues including anxiety, pain and poor sleep. “The research suggests CBD improves sleep in two ways,” explains Kim Smith, founder of CBD brand Kloris. “CBD has been shown to ease anxiety and pain, both of which can make it harder to fall or stay asleep. Secondly, CBD is known to interact with receptors in the brain that govern the body’s daily sleep/wake cycles.” Crucially, CBD contains almost no THC – the chemical responsible for cannabis’s psychoactive effects – so you don’t have to worry about being high while trying to sleep. “It’s popular to start on 500mg of CBD oil and build up to 1,000mg in your own time. It’s what I did when I began my CBD journey,” explains Smith.

What’s the best environment for sleep?

“Keep your bedroom dark so that you release the sleep hormone melatonin; and keep the temperature of your room cool, around 18°C, as your body temperature needs to drop before you can fall asleep,” says Walker. If you’re too warm, he suggests having a bath or a shower so your core body temperature drops more quickly. And if you can’t sleep, get out of bed, he advises, “Otherwise your brain learns to associate being in bed with being awake. Go into a different room, dim the lights and read a book until you feel tired again.”

Does a bedtime ritual make a difference to sleep quality?

Don't underestimate the effect a proper routine can have on improving your sleep.

"Regularity is king," says Walker. "Go to bed at the same time and wake up at the same time, even at the weekend." This helps to keep your body in sync with your natural circadian rhythm (our internal 24-hour clock).

A bath-time routine can be beneficial for adults as well as children. "Magnesium can positively impact sleep," explains nutritional therapist Eve Kalinik. "It's a mineral that helps the body to relax and it's one of the minerals we are generally more depleted in, as we use it up when we're stressed." Add a handful of Westlab Mindful Epsom & Himalayan Salts to your bath: magnesium-rich salts, combined with calming frankincense and bergamot essential oils, plus CBD to promote further relaxation.

When choosing a bedtime drink, steer clear of alcohol no matter how tempting a nightcap may be. "Alcohol is disruptive and blocks REM sleep," says Kalinik. Also, she adds, be careful about your caffeine intake during the day. "Caffeine has a quarter life of 12 hours, meaning if you have a coffee after noon, a quarter of the caffeine content will still be in your system long after you go to bed." Opt instead for calming alternatives. "Both valerian root and chamomile tea are anecdotally good before bed," suggests Kalinik.

Ultimately, the most important piece of advice is to experiment until you find the most calming sleep space and routine that suits *you* best. And don't expect change to happen (literally) overnight, give it a couple of weeks to see if you're feeling more rested. Sleep well.

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