

Ask the Doctor: Do I have insomnia and what remedies can I try?

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There isn't a parent in this world who's wondered if they'll ever get a full night's sleep again. We did warn you though that **life as you know it is over once you have kids**. Colic, all-night milk buffets and sick toddlers have ensured your rapid transition from Queen Bee to Mommy. But, if your **kids are sleeping through the night** (don't gloat about it) and you're still wide awake worrying why, perhaps it's time for a sleep intervention. We spoke to Dr. Colin Koh at Complete Healthcare International (CHI) to help you understand why you may be sleepless in Singapore.

I have trouble falling sleep. Could I have insomnia?

Insomnia is a common sleep disorder that is associated with difficulty in falling asleep or staying a sleep. It can cause fatigue, low energy, brain fog, and also affect your mood. Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep at night to function effectively. Short-term insomnia can occur after a traumatic event, or due to a temporary stressor like problems at work or home. This lasts only for a few days or weeks. However, if you've had trouble falling asleep for over a month, it's time to check with your doctor.

What could be the reasons be?

Trying to be a Jane-of-all-trades and a master of to-do lists can leave you feeling stressed and sleepless. Eating or working in bed, or basking in the glow of smartphones and tablets before bedtime (classic Mommy symptoms) can also be the culprits. Heavy dinners, too many caffeinated drinks, excess alcohol, and nicotine in tobacco products can all disrupt a goodnight's rest. If you are a frequent flyer, or work odd hours, inconsistent sleep patterns and jet lag can disrupt your internal body clock or circadian rhythm, leading to insomnia.

A more serious cause of insomnia may be underlying issues such as an anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and the early stages of depression. Sleep disorders such as sleep apnoea and restless leg syndrome can also cause disturbed sleep. Certain antidepressants and medications can also affect sleep patterns.

What treatment options can I try?

"The best way to get manage sleep without medication is to make the bedroom a sanctuary of rest and comfort," suggests Dr. Koh. "Prepare to sleep by taking a warm bath, reading, deep breathing exercises, prayer, or yoga. Finally, avoid trying too hard. Read in another room until you are sleepy. Don't stay in bed if you are not sleeping."

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) which has proven to be very effective, aims at creating a more restful environment for you to sleep. Avoid eating or working in bed and banish all shiny screens from your room. Try using earplugs or blackout curtains, and let go of daytime naps (even if your child is asleep). Find ways to manage anxiety, or depressive thoughts through counselling, and try relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation. Professional treatments like **guided imagery, biofeedback or sleep restriction techniques** can also help. Alternative treatments, including acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine can also help deal with insomnia, but make sure you consult certified therapists.

Medication, herbs and supplements: While undergoing treatments like CBT, sleeping pills or other medication may be prescribed to you. While these medicines can help you sleep, they do not cure insomnia and can make you groggy during the day. It's important that all medication should only be taken under a doctor's supervision. Studies suggest that melatonin with magnesium and zinc may help improve sleep quality, but long-term use is not recommended for insomnia. While certain herbal teas or a glass of warm milk might help you relax, The American Academy of Sleep Medicine does not recommend common herbs like valerian root, or dietary supplements such as St John's wort or L-tryptophan.

While insomnia is common, (yes there are many others like you) the reasons can be varied. Have some quiet introspection, and an honest discussion with your doctor so that they can customise a treatment plan to help you sleep better.

Dr Colin Koh graduated from the National University of Singapore in 1984. He has worked in Abu Dhabi, Vietnam and Indonesia as a family medicine doctor and healthcare administrator. Dr. Koh is certified in hyperbaric medicine and is a member of the American Anti-Aging Academy of Medicine.



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