

Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Lay Insomnia to Rest

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Most adults have experienced insomnia or sleeplessness at one time or another in their lives. Some people have trouble falling asleep. Others are unable to reach a deep sleep. Some may wake frequently and are restless. Others are startled awake by even the slightest noise. Quality sleep is integral to optimal immune function and chronic insomnia can lead to chronic illness. Left untreated, short term insomnia may become chronic, leading to mood disturbances such as irritability and depression, daytime lethargy, poor concentration and impaired memory; all of which can ultimately impact function at work and family life.

Insomnia is the most common sleep complaint across all stages of adulthood. For millions, the problem is chronic. An estimated 30% – 50% of people suffer from insomnia in the U.S. Although the incidence tends to increase with age, insomnia affects all age groups. Women are more often affected than men and insomnia is typically more common in mental health patients, divorced, separated, and widowed adults, people in lower socioeconomic groups and chronic alcoholics. Insomnia may be due to inadequate quality or quantity of sleep and is a complex condition not defined solely by a specific number of hours of sleep attained per night. Stress, cigarette smoking, coffee consumption, drug or alcohol abuse, anxiety, pain, irregular work schedules, and medication side effects are all known to contribute to insomnia. It often coexists with other disorders, particularly major depression, generalized anxiety, substance abuse and dementia, as well as some digestive, endocrine, pulmonary or cardiovascular system disorders. Other medical conditions including arthritis, Parkinson's disease, stroke and incontinence also affect sleep and increase the prevalence of insomnia. The many conditions associated with a diagnosis of insomnia may be its cause, its consequence, or share its risk factors.

Many people remain unaware of the options available to treat insomnia. Conventional treatments include various prescription and over the counter medications, cognitive and behavioral therapies. Complementary therapies include acupuncture, tai chi, yoga and light therapy. Acupuncture, the most well known modality of Oriental medicine, is widely used in the treatment of insomnia and has also been used successfully to treat contributing factors such as physical pain, stress, anxiety and depression. Conventional research indicates that acupuncture alters brain chemistry by changing the release of neurotransmitters and neurohormones, regulating the physiological state of the human body. According to the tenets of Chinese medicine, illness affects both the mind and body without separation. Acupuncture addresses both physical and emotional factors that contribute to insomnia, working to bring the body and mind into a healthy balance.

There is a growing patient demand for integrative care and it is fast becoming the future for medical care in our society. Physicians are learning that patients can benefit from additional therapies that do not interfere with programs or medications they have initiated. Medicine is in the midst of a dramatic convergence of modern medical science and ancient healing systems. This is based on a new understanding of mind-body medicine in which mind and body are viewed not as separate fragments, but rather as an integrated system. Oriental medicine may be used independently or in conjunction with conventional therapies in the treatment of insomnia. It is being widely studied and is offered at many well known institutions

including the Memorial-Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

The treatment of insomnia with Oriental medicine begins with a comprehensive evaluation and diagnosis by a licensed acupuncturist and includes development of a treatment plan that is patient specific and focused on the root cause of the insomnia. General acupuncture protocol for the treatment of chronic insomnia includes an initial course of 6-8 sessions at one to two sessions per week, followed by a gradual decrease in frequency and development of a patient specific follow up plan for maintenance. In some cases an individualized prescription of Chinese herbal medicine may be prescribed. In all cases, education in proper sleep hygiene, lifestyle counseling and development of self care strategies ensure optimal success in resolving insomnia.

Oriental medicine and acupuncture can be of tremendous assistance in treating insomnia, but in order to successfully and completely resolve a sleep disturbance each of the contributing factors must be individually addressed. The highest probability of success in normalizing sleep occurs when a patient is invested in wellness and can commit to other healthy lifestyle habits including:

- **Stress management:** A basic law of physics states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If the amount of stress in your life is monumental, strategies to alleviate that stress must be equal in vigor. Find a strategy that works for you. Learn and regularly practice active relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, meditation and stress management strategies.
- **Physical self care:** If physical pain or discomfort is a factor in the inability to fall or stay asleep, address and seek to resolve the problem. Treat physical conditions when they arise. Regular exercise and physical fitness help to reduce stress and fatigue, both of which can exacerbate insomnia.
- **Diet:** Include foods such as whole grains, beans, vegetables and fruit. Avoid protein intake before bedtime and late afternoon or evening consumption of alcohol, chocolate, tea, coffee and caffeinated soda.
- **Behavioral modification:** Wind down before bed. Avoid activities that encourage wakefulness and mental activity, such as heavy aerobic exercise, television, internet surfing and email before bedtime. Maintain a regular sleep-wake schedule. Adhere to a regular bedtime and routine every night.

It can be frustrating and scary when any disease or disorder takes away control. Insomnia should not dictate when or for how long you sleep. If you feel that you are not getting the rest you need, take steps to change it now. Oriental medicine can lead you back to a place of balance, giving you the power to lay insomnia to rest.

About the Author

Dr. Fecteau is a local integrative medicine and acupuncture specialist, dually licensed and nationally Board Certified in Occupational Therapy and Oriental medicine. She has been featured on NH Chronicle and in NH Magazine and currently serves as President of the New Hampshire Association for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. Dr. Fecteau maintains a private practice in Nashua, New Hampshire and is passionate about integrating the strengths of both conventional and complementary medicine. Her areas of specialization include the treatment of pain, stress and emotional/psychological disorders and her areas of interest include immunodysregulation and gastrointestinal disorders.

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