

The Best Insomnia Treatment Is Not a Drug

What Is Insomnia?

Insomnia is when you have trouble sleeping. You may have a hard time falling asleep, staying asleep, or both. It's normal for people to have trouble sleeping from time to time.

But you should see your doctor if your insomnia has lasted for several weeks or longer, and if you struggle getting to sleep a few nights each week. That could mean that you have “chronic insomnia.”

This report gives new advice for dealing with chronic insomnia, based on the latest research. It explains why we recommend trying cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to treat chronic insomnia.

Chronic Insomnia Should be Treated.

Poor sleep causes many problems. It can increase the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other conditions. It can increase accidents, irritability, and depression.

CBT Is an Effective Treatment.

CBT stands for cognitive behavioral therapy. In CBT, you work with someone who helps you develop better sleep habits and regular sleep routines.

There is strong scientific evidence that CBT works. The federal Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) reviewed different insomnia treatments. They compared CBT to drugs and alternative therapies. They found that CBT helps most adults with chronic insomnia. It's safer than drugs and has few or no side effects.

Sleep Drugs' Risks May Outweigh Benefits.

There are many kinds of sleep drugs.

- The newer sedative drugs like eszopiclone (Lunesta and generic) and zolpidem (Ambien and generic).
- Older sleep drugs called benzodiazepines.
- Several antidepressants that can cause drowsiness as a side effect, like trazodone.
- Over-the-counter allergy drugs such as diphenhydramine (in Benadryl Allergy, for example) and doxylamine.



All the sleep drugs have limited benefits. The newer sedatives add only 8 to 20 minutes of sleep time a night. The AHRQ did not find enough evidence that the older benzodiazepines were helpful in treating insomnia. There has not been enough research on how well the antidepressants and allergy drugs treat insomnia.

All these drugs have side effects. Most can cause next-day drowsiness, dizziness, and feeling unsteady. Those problems can increase the risk of falling or other accidents.

Little is known about the long-term safety and effectiveness of these drugs. However, far too many people take them for months or years.

That's why our Best Buy pick isn't a drug at all.

✓ Our Advice

For chronic insomnia, **Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs** recommends that you first try cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Just one session can help, but it's best to have at least four. Sessions done in a group or even online can also be helpful. That doesn't mean you should always avoid insomnia drugs. They can be helpful for a short time, and be used together with CBT.

Talk to Your Doctor About Insomnia

If your doctor says you have chronic insomnia, we recommend that you ask about trying Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) before trying a medication. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the American College of Physicians also recommend this.

Or talk to your doctor about trying CBT along with a sleep medicine. Some people may prefer to try both at the same time.

You can also try CBT even if you've been taking a sleep drug for a while. Talk to your doctor about the best way to stop taking a sleep medicine.

Tell Your Doctor

- If you take a sleeping pill for more than a week.
- If you have been depressed or anxious.
- If you have pain, hot flashes, heartburn, frequent urination, or waking up short of breath.
- About all your medicines. Some can increase your risk of side effects from sleeping pills. And some can interfere with sleep—including allergy and cold medicine, beta-blockers, and certain pain relievers, steroids, and asthma medicines.

Habits That Can Help You Sleep

Relax.	The best preparation for a good night's rest is unwinding and relaxing. Avoid busy or stressful activities late at night.
Set a sleep routine.	Try to go to bed and get up at about the same time each day. This helps you train your body to go to sleep.
Avoid naps after 3 p.m.	A long or late nap can leave you wide awake at bedtime.
Avoid alcohol for several hours before bedtime.	Alcohol disrupts sleeping and dreaming. People often go to sleep quickly but then wake up and can't go back to sleep.
Avoid coffee and nicotine for several hours before bedtime.	These are stimulants and can keep you awake. Some people need to avoid caffeine altogether.
Avoid a full meal or heavy food for several hours before bedtime.	This helps prevent indigestion and heartburn, two common causes of insomnia.
Avoid screens before bedtime.	Program content can cause stress and excitement. Also, the bright screens on tablets, can reduce levels of melatonin. Melatonin is a chemical in the body that helps us sleep.
Exercise during the day, but not at night.	Exercise may help you feel tired at night. But avoid vigorous exercise for several hours before bedtime, because it can wake you up too much.
Don't lie in bed and worry.	Don't stay in bed if you are awake, tossing and turning. Get up and do something relaxing, such as reading, until you are sleepy.