

From the Desk of ---- STUART GREENLEAF, L.Ac.



THE MANY FACES OF INSOMNIA

Fatigue, Pain, and Addiction:

As I interview new patients, problems with sleep are mentioned by the majority of people. They often complain that insomnia makes them feel tired all the time.

Daytime fatigue, while commonplace, is not normal, and it can significantly affect quality of life. Fatigue can contribute to depression, anxiety, and irritability, and can affect attention and concentration. In this way, insomnia may affect one's personal relationships and job performance. Loss of energy reserves can affect many systems, including immune function.

The body repairs itself during a state of deep sleep, and lack of sleep has been implicated in generalized pain problems such as fibromyalgia.

Insomnia can lead to abuse of prescription and non-prescription drugs: for sedative effect to help fall asleep, and for stimulant effect to get up and stay alert, as well as for pain.

Neurotransmitters:

MELATONIN is a powerful sleep inducer made by the pineal gland. It is inhibited by light and released during darkness. Someone with insomnia should avoid bright lights such as TV or computer in the evening.

Melatonin is made from serotonin. While the serotonin precursor 5-Hydroxy Tryptophan (5HTP) may be useful for depression, the L-Tryptophan form of this amino acid is preferable to aid sleep.

Melatonin production declines with aging, and oral melatonin supplements are available in various strengths. Depending on whether the problem is falling asleep or staying asleep, it may be used in rapid release or sustained release form.

GABA is a neurotransmitter which is like a warm blanket, and the brain releases GABA to calm itself. When depleted, its absence can cause anxiety as well as insomnia. A new supplement form called PharmaGABA appears to cross into the brain more effectively than previous GABA products.

Hormones:

MENOPAUSE and peri-menopause are strongly associated with insomnia. Herbs acting on estrogen receptors, such as black cohosh, may be of help. Bio-identical hormone replacement is safer than the conventional forms.

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CORTISOL is a stress response hormone produced by the adrenal glands. Prolonged stress blunts the pituitary gland's regulation of the adrenals and allows cortisol to be over-produced.

The phosphorylated form the amino acid serine is an intrinsic part of nerve cell membranes. Supplementation with this amino acid is a reliable measure to restore cortisol regulation, provided that the cause of stress is reduced.

LOW BLOOD SUGAR can result from the opposite imbalance, too little cortisol, as well as excessive insulin. People who have hypoglycemia during the day may be waking during the night because of it. Diet change, herbs and supplements can be effective measures.

Food Allergy, Environmental Toxins

An allergy to a specific food may irritate the central nervous system and cause insomnia, among other issues. A case comes to mind of a patient whose insomnia was resolved by avoiding milk products.

The nervous system is also vulnerable to of a wide range of chemical pollutants and heavy metals, which have become so pervasive in the environment.

Case Report #1:

A middle-age old woman complained of complete absence of sleep resulting in severe fatigue. I asked her initially about coffee consumption - only one cup per day at breakfast. Acupuncture and herb treatment gave some relief, but the problem was not solved.

I suggested that she experiment with total avoidance of caffeine in coffee, tea, cola drinks, and chocolate. After only a few days, the insomnia completely disappeared - she fell asleep promptly at 10, and did not get up even to use the bathroom until her alarm woke her at 5.

Was there extreme sensitivity to the stimulant effect of caffeine? Or was it an allergy to coffee affecting the nervous system?

Case Report #2. A 42 year old woman came in with severe insomnia. I had successfully treated her previously with acupuncture, but at this time neither acupuncture nor prescription drugs were effective. Examination of her teeth revealed many metal fillings, and a lab report showed mercury at 4 times the acceptable level.

Natural agents were used to slowly reduce the nervous system's contamination with mercury. Gradual improvement in sleep occurred, and after several months the problem was resolved.