



# Combating Sleepless Nights

Studies show that one in three people have insomnia at some point in their lives. With the stressful economic crisis underway, medical specialists are expecting the number of insomniacs to rise. *MillionaireAsia's* **Joann Chia** speaks to a neurologist and psychiatrist to learn more about this condition.

With all the hustle and bustle going on, getting seven to eight hours of sleep every night seems to be a luxury for many. What's worse is that when we finally lay down to rest, we end up tossing and turning in bed for hours on end. And before we know it, it's time to kick-start our day again.

Sleep deprivation may seem like a trivial matter in relation to many of life's other concerns, but it is essential for rejuvenation of both the mind and body, failing which we will eventually suffer from daytime drowsiness, poor concentration, irritability, increased risk of falls and accidents, and lower productivity.

## Knowing The Causes

Before delving into the causes of insomnia, it is important to understand that these are very much



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dependant on whether one is suffering from primary or secondary insomnia.

Primary insomnia is not associated with any specific medical or emotional factors, it is usually a result of external changes such as a long-haul air travel or shift work, creating disruptions to the body clock.

Secondary insomnia on the other hand, is much more complex and is typically triggered by a whole host of psychological, medical or emotional factors.

“Medical conditions that cause insomnia include restless legs syndrome, chronic pain, and nocturnal cough,” said Dr Adrian Tan, neurologist from MD Specialist Healthcare.

“It may also be related to poor sleep hygiene and habits.”

Sleeplessness can be brought about by a range of other general conditions including an overactive thyroid, gastrointestinal difficulties, obstructive sleep apnoea and heartburn. Even normal aging is associated with episodes of insomnia.

The commonest cause of secondary insomnia though,

is the side effects of medications and other chemical substances.

“In the psychiatric field itself, there are numerous psychiatric conditions associated with insomnia. For example, insomnia can occur in panic disorder, major depression, psychosis, post traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, or neuropsychiatric conditions like traumatic brain injury and dementia,” said Dr Francis Ngui, psychiatrist from Adam Road Medical Centre.

Dr Ngui added that people with Type A personalities who harbour grudges, worry and ruminate incessantly, as well as those who are very sensitive to physical symptoms in their bodies are more likely to be insomniacs.

## Treating Sleep Deprivation

The underlying cause of insomnia has to be diagnosed before it can be treated effectively. In general, a healthy lifestyle, regular exercise and proper nutrition, combined with social, intellectual and spiritual pursuits will bolster sleep.

Dr Ngui added, “For more resistant cases, a consultation with a mental health professional may be useful to explore other forms of treatment such as Jacobson's progressive muscle relaxation, hypnotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy.”

Sleeping tablets like benzodiazepines and Z-class hypnotics all help with short-term insomnia. However, Dr Ngui

warned, they all carry a risk of dependence. The more potent the sleeping pill, the higher the risk of dependence.

With the increase in the level of stress at the workplace due to job and economic uncertainties, both doctors feel that insomnia will be one of the earliest signs of distress.

## Sleep Tips

To ensure that sleep is not disrupted, Dr Tan advised the following, “Avoid coffee, tea, strenuous exercise two hours before sleep, and engage in stress relaxation techniques and meditation.”

A fixed sleep and wake cycle helps to synchronise the body clock for the required number of sleeping hours. “Curbing habits like nicotine, alcohol, late night outings, and computer use in the wee hours would be a step in the right direction,” said Dr Ngui.

These good sleeping habits are best cultivated from young. Parents should ensure that their school-going children set a routine lights-out time and get at least nine hours of sleep, even on weekends. Bad sleeping habits in a child make for bad sleeping habits when they reach adulthood, with sleep troubles likely to worsen due to the stresses of juggling work and family. ■

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