

Can Acupuncture Help Me Sleep? 7 Tips for Better Sleep

Sleep. It is one of the most important things you can do for your health (in addition to eating well, exercising and controlling stress). Sleep can affect mood, [weight](#), immunity, [stress levels](#) (see sleep-stress cycle), how quickly we heal from illness or injury as well as our memory and mental clarity. Unfortunately for many, a good night's sleep can be elusive. Sometimes no matter how tired we are we just can't fall asleep. Or if we fall asleep, we wake up and spend hours trying to get back to sleep. Sometimes we are up all night with hot flashes and night sweats. There are many things keeping us awake at night. How often do you get the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night?

Here are some Chinese medicine reasons why insomnia happens and what can be done about it.

Nighttime is the time of Yin where darkness and cooler temperatures take over. This is the ideal time to sleep. According to Chinese Medicine, during the day, the Spirit resides in our Heart/Brain and animates us through our day. At night the Spirit leaves the Heart and goes into the Liver to rest for the night. If the Liver cannot contain the Spirit (due to any of a variety of Liver imbalances), the Spirit gets up and walks around at night; this leaves us with insomnia, either with trouble falling asleep (onset insomnia) or with staying asleep (matitudinal insomnia). This is also why alcohol can cause sleep problems for some people, especially between 1-3am. This is the peak time for Liver energy (all internal organs have a 2 hour window of peak energy and nadir of energy 12 hours later). If the Liver is trying to process the alcohol, rather than trying to contain the Spirit, the Spirit becomes disturbed and cannot rest, so it is common to have insomnia symptoms occur during this time.

If the Liver (Blood) is weak (symptoms of dizziness, blurred vision, floaters, dry skin/hair, trouble falling asleep, light menstrual flow), the Liver isn't strong enough to contain the Spirit. If you notice your mind racing, keeping you from falling asleep or staying asleep, you may also have a Kidney weakness which is failing to support and ground the Liver. You may have some form of heat rising (Yang or Fire) which is agitating the spirit, preventing sleep from happening; this is often the case where hormonal changes are interfering with sleep (symptoms of hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, irritability or anxiety).

In order to get good sleep, you must prepare your body for it. Creating a bedtime routine or a good sleep environment in your home, or at least your bedroom, can help your body know that sleep is coming soon. Here are 7 ways to help prepare your body for sleep:

1. Turn off all electronics at least 30-60 minutes before you intend to fall asleep. Electronics are not only stimulating mentally, but by shining light directly into your eyes, it prevents your brain from manufacturing melatonin, the sleep hormone, which your brain only makes when you are in darkness. A great way to prepare for bed is to dim the lights a bit in your house, easing yourself into thinking about sleep.
2. Make sure you don't have "light pollution" in your bedroom. The bedroom should be for 2 things: sex and sleep. Having a television, digital alarm clock or light coming in from the street

can all disrupt the darkness that your brain needs. Plus certain electronics create a low level "hum" that some people are sensitive to that can agitate the nervous system on an unconscious level interfering with the quality of sleep you get.

3. Avoid caffeine after noon. Caffeine can stay in your system for 8-12 hours so even if you have some in the afternoon it can affect your sleep. Watch out for hidden caffeine in chocolate and decaf teas and coffee. Only herbal tea is truly caffeine free. Decaf coffee and tea have a significant reduction in caffeine, but can still contain up to 3% of the original amount. If you are sensitive, even this amount can keep you awake.

4. Take a warm shower or bath before bed. Heating the body up creates a cool down period that is sleep inducing. You can also add lavender essential oils to the bath which will increase the relaxation factor.

5. Drinking a warm beverage, like chamomile or valerian tea or even warm milk before bed can help you feel more relaxed. This is good especially if you have trouble falling asleep due to an anxious or racing mind. If liquid before bed causes you to wake up in the night to urinate, you can use [Rescue Remedy](#) or [Rescue Sleep](#), made by Bach Flower Essences. They have the same type of calming effect, but you only need 4 drops. You can also eat more melatonin producing foods, such as cherries and kiwis. Any of these remedies should be used about 30-60 minutes before bed, or if you wake during the night.

6. Deep breathing and sequential relaxation are techniques that you can use in bed, either to help you fall asleep or return to sleep.

- For deep breathing, lie down in bed on your back, close your eyes and place your hands on your lower abdomen. First just observe yourself breathing, noticing if your chest or your belly is rising and falling. If your chest is moving, actively try to breathe into your belly, feeling your hands rise with your inhale and fall with the exhale. Imagine that your belly is a balloon and that as you inhale you are filling the balloon causing it to expand, and as you exhale the balloon deflates. Performing deep breathing for 3-5 minutes can help you let go of the day, let go of the anxiety over falling asleep and help you drop into your body so that sleep can overtake you.

- Sequential relaxation is another useful technique. Lie on your back, close your eyes and breathe naturally. Bring your attention to the top of your head and try to relax the muscles there. Focus on your eyebrows and relax them apart. Let your eyes fall back into their sockets. Continue like this, relaxing one body part at a time, moving your attention from your head down to your feet. By the end you have either already fallen asleep or you are so relaxed that it is easier to drift off.

7. If heat is the culprit, there is a yogic breathing technique called Sitali (pronounced shee-TAH-lee) that can help cool you down. Open your mouth and roll your tongue into a tube (if you can't roll your tongue, just stick it out). Inhale slowly through the "tongue tube." You'll notice the air

is very cool on your tongue. Exhale through your nose with your mouth closed. Try to make the exhale at least as long or longer than your inhale. This type of pranayama, or breath work, is cooling and calming to the mind, and can be very helpful if hot flashes or night sweats are keeping you awake at night.

If, after you've tried all of these techniques, sleep still eludes you, you might want to call your local acupuncturist and get in for some treatment. Your acupuncturist can tailor your treatment to the specific imbalances that are preventing your sleep. He or she may also prescribe Chinese herbs or dietary changes if you've been suffering for a long time and need more intensive treatment.



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