What to Do When You Take Medications That Cause Insomnia

A lot of common medications can wreak havoc on your sleep and you may not even realize it.

January 5, 2022 By Michael Breus, PhD

More than 131 million people in the United States use prescription drugs. That has the potential to create a lot of sleep disturbances, especially since insomnia is a common side effect of many popular prescriptions. Whether you're taking medication for something relatively minor like allergies or a much more serious health issue, poor sleep is a real possibility for anyone who requires prescription drugs to be healthy.

Are you worried that your prescription medication is causing you to lose sleep? Rest easy— even if it is, there are steps you can take to make sure you stay healthy and well-rested.

Let's break this down: We'll start by taking a look at the types of insomnia, and what medicines can cause insomnia symptoms.

What You May Not Know About Insomnia

There's a lot more to insomnia than just not sleeping well. Apart from its effect on your rest, insomnia can have a huge impact on your mental health. If you're worried about either or both, insomnia symptoms to keep an eye out for can include:

- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep (This is the big one people know when they think of insomnia)
- Waking up too early
- Daytime sleepiness or not feeling rested after sleep
- Difficulty concentrating or decreased focus
- Irritability or depression

There are two types of insomnia: primary insomnia, and secondary insomnia. Primary insomnia means that your sleep problems aren't linked to another condition, while secondary insomnia means that an additional condition or substance is disturbing your rest.

If you experience primary insomnia, it may be somewhat easier to find treatment options since you're not treating an additional disorder.

Another way to describe cases of insomnia is by their frequency or severity.

- Acute Insomnia or Transient Insomnia: These cases don't last very long, and can range from a single night to a few weeks of sleep issues.
- Chronic Insomnia: If you struggle to sleep at least three nights a week for three months or more, then you're experiencing chronic insomnia.

Why Do Some Medications Cause Insomnia?

Medications work by altering our body or brain chemistry in order to achieve a desired effect. Sometimes these effects can impact our wakefulness— either they can make us feel groggy and sleepy during the day, or wide awake at night. They can also produce side effects that may unintentionally keep us awake at night, including conditions such as heartburn, body aches, or the need to get up and go to the bathroom during the night.

It's not uncommon to have insomnia or sleep disturbances if you take prescription medications, especially if you take them at night. It's important to keep your side effects under control though, especially if they disturb your rest. Insomnia at night can contribute to excessive daytime sleepiness, which can leave you feeling run down and tired all the time if left unchecked.

What Medicines Cause Insomnia?

A lot of different prescription and non-prescription drugs can cause poor sleep. Among them include:

- Medications that contain stimulants, including some allergy medications
- Prescription sleeping pills and other sleep drugs (Yes, really. More on this below.)
- Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor, or SSRI medications, including antidepressants
- Medications that treat high blood pressure, including beta-blockers
- Dopamine agonists used to treat Parkinson's Disease
- Medications for Restless Legs Syndrome, including dopamine agonists

This is not an exhaustive list of all the medications that can cause insomnia— if you're concerned about how your medications may be impacting your sleep, be sure to talk to your doctor to see what your options are.

The Dark Side of Sleep Medications

If you regularly experience sleep disturbances, a sleeping pill may feel like the magic solution to your woes. It's not, especially if you experience long-term sleep issues.

It may seem hard to believe, but sleep aids can actually make it harder for you to sleep if you've been taking them for a while, and they can even be habit-forming. The body develops a dependency on the sleep drug, which worsens when the medication loses efficacy after extended use. Those who have taken sleep aids for extended periods can experience what's known as rebound insomnia, or worsened sleep problems following the discontinuation of sleep aids.

Sleep medications come in three forms, including:

- Benzodiazepine medications such as Xanax or Ativan
- Nonbenzodiazepine hypnotics such as Lunesta or Ambien
- Melatonin receptor agonists, like Rozerem

Benzodiazepine receptor agonist medications— also known as sedative hypnotics— used to treat insomnia such as Zolpidem can cause serious and potentially life-threatening sleep behaviors. This medication has caused people to get out of bed and do certain activities while not fully awake, including sleepwalking, cooking, and even driving their cars!

Side effects of sleep medications can be very severe, so if you are prescribed any of these drugs, it's important to watch out for any potentially dangerous side effects.

What Do I Do If My Medication Negatively Impacts My Sleep?

There's a lot you can do to sleep better if your medications are sabotaging your sleep. Here are a few of my recommendations.

Before giving any of these a try though, please consult your doctor first. Even if they're affecting your sleep, it's important to continue taking your medications as prescribed until you can make alternate arrangements with your doctor.

1. Try a Different Prescription

The definition of insanity is doing something over and over and expecting different results. If your current prescription isn't working for you, then seeking an alternative can be the difference between restful sleep and another exhausting night. Your doctor can help you find alternatives to your current medication and create a plan that fits your medical needs.

2. Change Your Dosage

Prescription dosages are not a "one size fits all" situation. Lowering your dosage of certain medications can reduce the negative effects you may be feeling at night, and make it easier for

you to get the rest you need.

3. Take Your Medication at a Different Time

Sometimes timing can make all the difference. If there's flexibility in when you take your medications, taking them at a different time can make all the difference in your sleep quality. This is especially true for medications that contain stimulants— you don't want to take something that's supposed to keep you awake close to bedtime.

However, if you need to take your prescription on a set schedule, talk to your doctor before you do anything.

4. Try a Supplement to Help You Sleep

Before we go any further, you still want to talk to your doctor if you plan on incorporating a sleep supplement. Also, make sure that any supplements you take won't interact with your prescriptions!

A lot of natural sleep aids are readily available in the market, so it can be a little intimidating to figure out what works best for you. Here are some of my recommendations:

- Magnesium
- Valerian Root
- Melatonin

I also recommend my own formula, Sleep Doctor PM, for your short-term sleep issues. This safe, balanced formula combines the above supplements as well as magnolia bark and others in a convenient spray to help you either fall asleep, or return to sleep if you've awakened in the middle of the night. The middle of the night formula does not contain melatonin so you won't feel groggy in the morning.

5. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Sleep Hygiene

I've mentioned the benefits of cognitive behavioral therapy before— not only is it an excellent treatment for anxiety, but it's also highly effective in treating insomnia! Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia, or CBT-I, is a popular and effective treatment for primary insomnia. In fact, between 70 and 80 percent of patients showed improvement in their symptoms following CBT-I therapy!

CBT works by helping patients cope with their anxieties and stop the cycle of negative thinking that keeps them up at night. This awareness and self-reflection encourage personal growth and wellness as patients recover.

Along with CBT, proper sleep hygiene can go a long way in helping you get the deep, restful REM sleep you need each night. This includes going to bed and waking up at the same time each day,

making your bedroom an ideal sleep environment, and giving yourself plenty of time to unwind before bed.

When to Seek Further Help

If you've made adjustments to your dosage, schedule, or lifestyle and you're still having trouble sleeping, then insomnia may not be your only worry. It's possible you may have an additional sleep disorder like Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA).

It's important to get in touch with your doctor or a sleep expert to see what the problem is, and get started with appropriate treatment. If you need help finding accredited sleep specialists or sleep centers near you, I recommend using this tool by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.

Your overall health and your sleep health go hand in hand—taking care of one helps take care of the other. A lot of prescription drugs can cause insomnia or contribute to sleep disorders, but they don't have to. If you're worried that your medication makes it difficult for you to get a good night's sleep, relief can be a single call to your doctor away.

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