

(SLEEP DEBT)

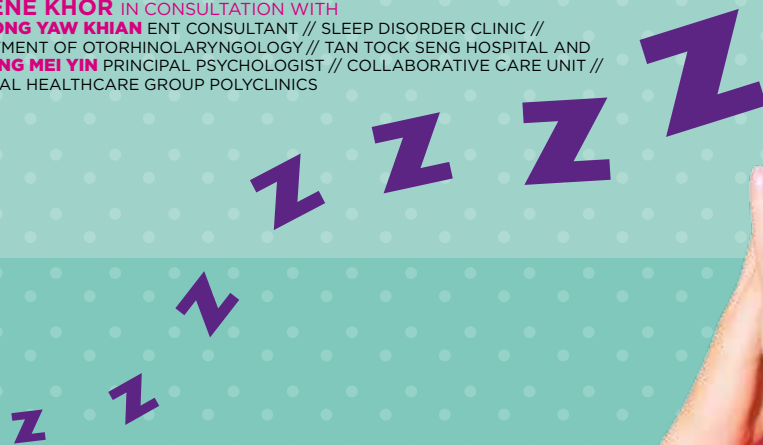
UP



all night

TOSSING AND TURNING PAST YOUR BEDTIME?
HERE'S HOW TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S REST.

BY **GENE KHOR** IN CONSULTATION WITH
DR CHONG YAW KHIAN ENT CONSULTANT // SLEEP DISORDER CLINIC //
DEPARTMENT OF OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGY // TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL AND
DR WONG MEI YIN PRINCIPAL PSYCHOLOGIST // COLLABORATIVE CARE UNIT //
NATIONAL HEALTHCARE GROUP POLYCLINICS





AFTER A LONG DAY, few things are more appealing than diving into bed. So, you lay your head on your pillow, close your eyes and wait for sleep ... which never comes. Only after much tossing and turning and counting of sheep do you finally slip into slumber. But by then, it's too late and you're left with only a few hours of shut-eye before you have to get up.

If this sounds familiar, you are one of many people who suffer from a sleep disorder. According to the Philips Index for Health and Well-being, a survey conducted across 23 countries including Singapore by electronics manufacturer Philips and released in March 2011, 35 per cent of people felt that they did not get enough sleep.

One of the most common sleep disorders is **insomnia**, where the individual is unable to fall asleep or has difficulty in staying asleep.

Dr Chong Yaw Khian, Ear Nose and Throat Consultant at the Sleep Disorder Clinic at the Department of Otorhinolaryngology in Tan Tock Seng Hospital, explains that insomnia sufferers are at increased risk of developing hypertension and other heart diseases, as well as diabetes and obesity.

"It can have a huge psychological impact on the individual and result in poor work performance, memory loss, slow reaction time, irritability and a higher risk of depression and anxiety," he says. "Studies have also shown that insomniacs have a higher incidence of road-related accidents. Insomnia significantly decreases the sufferer's overall quality of life."

Insomnia can be acute (lasting a few nights to a few weeks) or chronic (occurring three nights a week for a month or longer). It is common for insomnia to come and go, with periods of no sleep problems.

People of all ages can be affected, although those more likely to have it are people above the age of 60, those with a history of mental health disorders like depression, or those who work late-night shifts or who frequently travel across time zones, such as airline crew.

AVOID STIMULATION FROM STREETLIGHTS OR TRAFFIC NOISE — WEAR A MASK OR EARPLUGS IF NEEDED.

INSOMNIA CAN HAVE A HUGE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT AND RESULT IN POOR WORK PERFORMANCE. IT SIGNIFICANTLY DECREASES THE SUFFERER'S QUALITY OF LIFE.

In Singapore, acute insomnia is the more common type. "This is likely to be due to our hectic, fast-moving lifestyle," says Dr Chong. At the Sleep Disorder Clinic, about 15 per cent of patients suffer from insomnia.

What Causes It?

Is one bad night's rest a sign of insomnia, or must it be a prolonged problem? According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, a widely-used diagnostic handbook published by the American Psychiatric Association, there are several criteria to diagnosing insomnia:

- Difficulty initiating and maintaining sleep — frequent awakening or problems returning to sleep thereafter
- The sleep problems cause significant distress or impairment at work/school or in social situations
- It occurs at least three times a week
- It occurs for three months or more
- Sleep problems happen despite having adequate opportunities for sleep
- The insomnia is not better explained by the presence of another sleep disorder or by psychological effects of a medical substance

The first step in dealing with insomnia is to recognise what causes it. There are two types of insomnia. **Primary insomnia** is insomnia that does not have any apparent contributing factors — although sometimes life stress and emotional turmoil can trigger it.

Secondary insomnia, however, is brought about by a variety of external factors. According to Dr Wong Mei Yin, Principal Psychologist from the Collaborative Care Unit at National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, common causes include but are not limited to:

- ▶ **Psychological stressors:** Worrying about work, studies, health or family can keep the mind active at night and make it difficult to sleep. Going through emotionally-trying events like the death or illness of a loved one, a divorce, or job loss can also lead to insomnia.



(SLEEP DEBT)

- ▶ **Medical conditions:** People with chronic pain, breathing difficulties or the need to urinate frequently might develop insomnia. Other conditions that cause insomnia include having arthritis, cancer, lung disease, and having had heart failure and stroke.
- ▶ **Poor sleep habits:** Insomnia can stem from having an irregular sleep schedule, doing things that stimulate the brain just before bed, or being in an uncomfortable sleep environment.
- ▶ **Medication:** Many prescription drugs can interfere with sleep like some antidepressants, heart and blood pressure medication, allergy medication, stimulants and [steroid hormone] corticosteroids.
- ▶ **Lifestyle factors:** Eating heavily late in the evening may cause physical discomfort before sleep. Drinking coffee, tea and other caffeinated drinks in the late afternoon or later can affect sleep. Nicotine in tobacco products is another stimulant that can cause insomnia. Alcohol is a sedative that may help in falling asleep, but it prevents deeper stages of sleep and often causes awakening in the middle of the night.
- ▶ **Additional causes:** Other possible reasons such as a change of environment or work schedule which disrupt the body's sleep cycle or sleeping beside a partner who snores can cause insomnia.

Snooze Solutions

After identifying the cause of your insomnia with a doctor's help, treatment can be prescribed. But in many cases, Dr Chong says that beating insomnia, whether primary or secondary, is simply a matter of practising good sleep habits. For a better night's rest, avoid:

- taking daytime naps
- caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol late in the day
- exercising within three to four hours of bedtime as it may stimulate you
- eating a heavy dinner (although a light snack before bedtime may help you fall asleep easier)
- stimulation from streetlights or traffic noise — wear a mask or earplugs if needed
- using your bed for anything other than sleep or sex
- worrying about things at bedtime — make a to-do list before bed
- sleeping next to your mobile phone — and if you must, silence it totally

Dr Chong adds that practising a good sleep routine by going to bed and getting up at the same times every day, can help you avoid insomnia. **LW**

BEATING INSOMNIA IS SIMPLY A MATTER OF PRACTISING GOOD SLEEP HABITS.

DR CHONG YAW KHIAN

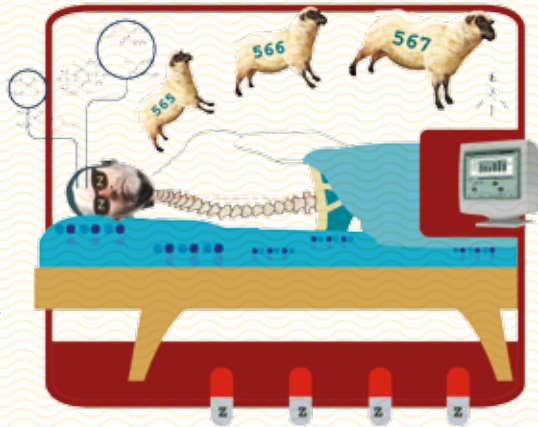
WHAT IS SLEEP APNOEA?

Besides insomnia, which affects one's ability to get to sleep or stay asleep, other conditions can get in the way of a restful slumber.

One of these conditions is obstructive sleep apnoea, in which one's airway is partially or completely blocked temporarily, affecting breathing. In some, this obstruction can occur hundreds of times a night, according to health portal *WebMD*.

"Every night since August 2013, I'd wake up feeling like I hadn't slept, even though I thought I'd had at least eight hours' sleep," says John (not his real name), who is in his mid-30s. "At first, I passed my constant fatigue off as a result of a hectic day at work. But, as my daytime exhaustion persisted, I changed my sleep habits to try and improve my situation."

John started exercising regularly and stopped going out late at night. He also stopped checking



his smartphone and computer at least an hour before he went to bed, sometimes as early as 9pm.

However, his condition did not improve. "It really affected my social life — all I could think about was going home to sleep," he says. "I didn't want to hang out with my girlfriend and friends — it was a chore to remain focused and have a simple conversation with them."

In January this year, after seeking medical advice, John was referred

to Tan Tock Seng Hospital's Dr Chong Yaw Khian. "One possible explanation for John's condition is that his airway collapses several times while he sleeps, which causes him to stop breathing," says Dr Chong. "As a result, vital organs like his brain and heart don't receive enough oxygen, which would lead to him waking up and not feeling refreshed. If his condition continues without being addressed, it could lead to

increased risks of cardiac problems like heart attack and high blood pressure, or stroke."

At the time of writing, John was scheduled for an in-hospital level 1 sleep study during which his entire sleep profile and biophysical parameters are analysed. Thereafter, he will be given an appointment to see Dr Chong at the Sleep Disorder Clinic. Further management of John's condition will depend on his sleep study results.