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ACUPUNCTURE, SLEEP & RELAXATION

It is common for patients to stretch and yawn after an acupuncture treatment. They often are very relaxed, or just woke from a soothing nap on the massage table. It may be hard to believe that getting stuck with needles – sometimes buzzing with electric current, sometimes topped by a smoldering bunch of herb (*moxa*) – can lead to a restful, serene sense of well-being and utter relaxation, but it's true: acupuncture and herbs can help soothe the everyday stresses of life during the day, and encourage better sleep at night.

INSOMNIA: THE CONDITION & THE CAUSES

Everyone experiences the occasional night tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Sometimes it's difficult to get physically comfortable, sometimes the body is too tense to relax, and often the mind is racing, worried, troubled and unwilling to stop mulling over the problems of the day. Usually these bouts of restlessness resolve themselves, and after a few nights we are able to sleep again. Sometimes, though, the sleeplessness persists. Insomnia is characterized by difficulty falling asleep, trouble staying asleep (frequent waking), or waking early. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) estimates that insomnia affects roughly one-third of adults, with about 10% complaining of "chronic insomnia," meaning the trouble lasts longer than one month and occurs at least three nights per week. This cumulative loss of sleep can have nasty effects on your waking hours. You may be depressed, listless, forgetful, easily angered, and have difficulty concentrating. And of course there is the ever-present fatigue.



Doctors divide insomnia into two categories: *primary insomnia*, which is insomnia not caused by outside factors that persists for a month or longer and *secondary insomnia*, which is a side-effect of some other problem, such as drug or alcohol use, depression, anxiety and trauma. Secondary insomnia is much more common. Usually secondary insomnia can be treated by addressing outside factors, such as eliminating caffeine or alleviating stress. Often doctors write prescriptions for sleeping pills – according to the research company IMS Health, about 42 million of these prescriptions were filled in the U.S. in 2005, up 60% from 2000. These can be helpful in the short term, but patients should only use them for the prescribed period, which is usually no more than a few weeks. They should also be careful while taking these drugs, making sure not to mix them with other medications unless under a doctor's careful supervision. It is important, too, to abstain from alcohol while on any sleep medications, whether prescription or over-the-counter.

The problem that often arises when treating insomnia with drugs is dependency: the more you rely on drugs, prescription or otherwise, to help you fall asleep and stay asleep, the less able you may be to achieve sleep without them. It is similar to over-using headache medicines: when you stop using them, you can have a “rebound” headache. Likewise, when you stop taking sleeping pills, your insomnia may return with a vengeance. It can be a vicious cycle of sleeplessness and drugs. What can a person do to avoid the pharmacy and still get a decent, restorative rest?

INSOMNIA: THE CURE



A fine alternative is acupuncture. In acupuncture and oriental medicine, certain meridian patterns will create certain emotional disturbances, resulting in insomnia. For example, Heart Meridian is related to joy and sadness; Liver Meridian is related to anger and depression; Spleen Meridian is related to worry; Kidney Meridian is related to fear. There are several different mixed-meridian patterns responsible for insomnia. These are:

1. Heart & Kidney Yin deficiency
2. Heart, Blood & Spleen Chi deficiency
3. Heart Chi & Blood stagnation
4. Heart & Kidney Yang deficiency
5. Stomach food stagnation
6. Liver Chi stagnation.

Acupuncture calms the nervous system. Benefits of acupuncture include deeper breathing, better digestion, better sleeping patterns, decrease in pains and aches, and a general sense of well-being, all of which help in treating insomnia. It has also been shown to increase production of melatonin, a hormone discussed below.

Herbs and supplements are also very helpful in treating insomnia. One popular over-the-counter remedy is *valerian root*. In its natural state it has an intense, pungent odor, and can be unpleasant to the smell and taste in teas and capsules. Still, it is quite effective in reducing tension and promoting relaxation and sleep. Another, more pleasant tasting and smelling herb is *chamomile*. Chamomile is widely available and very popular when brewed in tea. It is much more subtle, not as strong as valerian, and has a calming, soothing effect. Both valerian and chamomile should be taken 45 minutes to an hour before sleep. Also recommended is *melatonin*, a hormone found in all living creatures from algae to humans. Melatonin plays a role in regulating the *circadian rhythm* – the body’s schedule of wakefulness and sleep. Your *pineal gland*, a gland about the size of a pea, is located in the center of the brain. This gland manufactures melatonin, helping you sleep. If you take melatonin, use it in the evening, an hour or two before you plan to go to bed. Some supplements provide high doses; however, a low dose of .5 mg is more effective, and causes fewer side effects. Too much melatonin can result in fitful sleep and vivid nightmares, hormone fluctuations and irritability. As in all things, moderation is best.



Some Chinese herbal formulas commonly used in battling insomnia are: *Te Xiao Zao Ren An Mian Wan*, *Tian Wang Bu Xin Wan*, *Chai Hu Long Gu Mu Li Wan*, *Tian Wang Bu Xin Wan*, *An Shen Bu Xin Wan*, and *Xiao Yao Wan*. Dr. Wang can determine which formula is right for your particular brand of insomnia or stress.

Here are some practical, everyday things you can do to improve the quality and quantity of your sleep:

- Limit or eliminate intake of caffeine and nicotine, both of which act as stimulants, especially in the evening.
- Limit or eliminate alcohol. Although alcohol can help you to fall asleep quickly, it promotes uneven sleep and frequent waking, ultimately lowering sleep quality.
- Stay active. Regular exercise enhances deep sleep, though you should avoid exercising in the few hours before bed since it increases alertness.
- Avoid long naps. A short afternoon nap (less than 30 minutes) can be refreshing, but napping longer than that can keep you from falling asleep at night.
- Try to go to sleep and wake at the same times each day. Establishing a pattern of regular rest will increase daytime alertness and decrease insomnia.
- Avoid eating several hours before bed. Often the processes of digestion can lead to fitful sleep.
- Eat a well-balanced diet. Avoid processed foods and try to stick with whole-grains, fruits, vegetables and lean protein. The additives and sugars in many processed foods can impair restfulness. A good rule of thumb is this: the closer a food is to nature, the better.
- Practice physically relaxing. Techniques such as yoga, bio-feedback and meditation, as well as acupuncture and massage, can aid in relaxing the body and calming the mind.

Insomnia is a common ailment. It can lead to daytime sluggishness, depression, frustration and forgetfulness. Most of the modern drugs used to treat insomnia have unpleasant side-effects and can lead to dependence. Fortunately, through use of acupuncture, herbs and sensible lifestyle changes, you can end your sleepless nights and get the restorative rest your body truly craves.

