

Japanese cockroach exercise for insomniacs



YOUR HEALTH

DR GITA MATHAI

I often get patients who say, "I cannot sleep. Give me some sleeping tablets." There is no one-size-fits-all sleeping tablet for all cases of insomnia, especially since there are different types. Some people cannot fall asleep; others have early waking or fragmented sleep with several episodes of wakefulness.

Sleep is the time when the body recovers, repairs and rejuvenates itself. If you buy a machine, you cannot run it continuously forever. It needs to be oiled, rested and serviced. Similarly, our bodies need adequate rest so that cells can repair themselves, and chemicals and hormones can be replenished and restored to their normal levels.

Babies require about 16-18 hours of sleep a day, so that they can develop physically and mentally. School-going children need around 9-12 hours of sleep, while teenagers generally require 8-10 hours. Most adults need about 7-9 hours.

These figures are guidelines, as individual requirements vary. Chronic lack of sleep can lead to sudden, inappropriate episodes of sleep while interacting with friends or, dangerously, while driving or operating heavy machinery.

If you have trouble falling asleep, try to go to bed and wake up at approximately the same time every day. The bedroom should be quiet, comfortable and dark. Ideally, have your last cup of tea or coffee at least

six to eight hours before bedtime. Switch off the television, mobile phone and other electronic devices two hours before you sleep. Try to relax by reading a book or listening to soothing music. Eat your last meal at least 2-3 hours before bedtime. Exercise is extremely important for quality, sustained sleep. However, you should preferably complete strenuous exercise two hours before bedtime.

If you repeatedly wake up to pass urine, you may need to be evaluated for conditions such as diabetes, urinary tract infections, prostate enlargement or effects of medications.

Another increasingly common cause of fragmented sleep is obstructive sleep apnoea, particularly in people who are overweight. During sleep, the airway becomes blocked and breathing temporarily stops.

The brain senses the lack of oxygen and briefly wakes you so that breathing can restart. Obstructive sleep apnoea needs proper diagnosis and treatment.

If confirmed, some may require a CPAP machine.

If you are lying awake unable to sleep, slow breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and stretching may help. Try a simple mental exercise. Count forwards by threes, or start at 10,000 and slowly subtract three each time. The idea is to occupy the mind with something repetitive and unexciting.

Then there is the Japanese cockroach exercise where you lie in your bed with your hands and feet in the air and shake them around for 30 seconds to two minutes. You will fall asleep, as long as you don't have to get up to switch off the light.

Sleeping tablets may seem like a quick fix but they are habit-forming and addictive. Good, healthy sleep is about quality, not quantity.



Dr Gita Mathai has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. If you have questions on health issues, write to yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in