## **LIFE** HEALTH

## Don't use pills for summer insomnia



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Don't be afraid to go to sleep. (PHOTO ILLUSTRATION)

For most people, the long days of summer light bring happy activities and good moods. For those struggling with insomnia, more shut-eye is just a dream. Part of the challenge in getting enough sleep during the summer is that many activities — from barbecues to fireworks displays — run later because of the extra daylight. Another challenge is that a poorly shaded bedroom window allows the earlier sunrise to wake you before you are ready.

Melatonin is a naturally produced hormone that helps control your own internal clock for sleep and wake cycles. Melatonin rises with a decrease in light in the evening and is suppressed by light in the daytime. That means changes in light with the seasons, as well as artificial light — including backlit screens from TVs, computer monitors, tablets, and phones — can alter our melatonin production. Additionally, melatonin levels slowly decrease with age, leaving older adults with more sleep issues. Other issues that can cause insomnia include stress, night-shift work, travelling across time zones, asthma, depression, substance abuse, and a sedentary lifestyle.

Sleeping pills may seem like a good solution, but they are not without risk. In 2012, a large group-comparative study showed a significantly higher risk of death for those taking sleeping pills over those not. There are other options.

Melatonin is available in pill form and may be a suitable solution for some. Herbs like valerian, passion flower, hops, and lemon balm are also commonly employed. Even something as simple as a warm bath, soothing music, chamomile tea, or a wind-down night-time routine can be helpful.

Acupuncture appears to increase nocturnal melatonin secretion, allowing for a deeper, more restful sleep, as reported in a preliminary study in the Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences. Acupuncture has also been found to increase serotonin production, and low serotonin levels during the day can result in sleep disruption at night.

Chinese herbal formulas are sometimes specifically prescribed to help with sleep. One of the most commonly prescribed sleeping formulas in Traditional Chinese Medicine is called Suan Zao Ren Tang, but formulas vary for each individual. In fact, though it might seem counter-intuitive, sometimes energy-building herbs like ginseng are used to help with sleep, as they are not actually stimulants.

Sleep is one of the most important things you do for your good health, so if you suffer from insomnia, find a healthy way to get your Zzzzzs.

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