

Choosing Wisely[®]

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Sleeping pills for insomnia

They may not be the best treatment option

Insomnia (trouble sleeping) is a common problem. It's considered "chronic" if it occurs three nights or more a week for at least three months.

If you have trouble sleeping, you may be thinking about getting a prescription for sleeping pills. But these drugs are often not the best option. And they can cause other problems. Here's what you need to know.

Sleeping pills may be over-used.

Sleeping pills are one of the most-prescribed drugs in the US. This is partly because many patients ask for them. Also, many doctors prescribe sleeping pills instead of trying other treatments first.

Sleeping pills may not help as much as you think.

Sleep studies show that they only help people fall asleep about 8 to 20 minutes faster. And they add less than 35 minutes to nightly sleep.



Sleeping pills have risks and side effects.

If you take sleeping pills for many days in a row, one risk is that you may start to depend on them. You may need them to fall asleep. If you stop taking them, you may sleep worse than you did before you tried the pills. This is why most doctors recommend you only take them occasionally, or for a few days in a row.

Other risks and side effects may include:

- Daytime drowsiness
- Dizziness and hallucinations
- Sleepwalking and sleep-eating

Over-the-counter sleep aids, such as those with the antihistamine diphenhydramine (Benadryl, Tylenol PM, and generic), have risks too. Ask your doctor if these are safe for you.

Counseling can help you avoid sleeping pills.

A type of short-term counseling called **cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)** may be a better option for you. It usually works at least as well as sleeping pills, and it doesn't have any of the risks.

Most people sleep better with CBT. With CBT, you may learn new sleeping habits, for example:

- To get up at the same time every day.
- To stop watching TV in bed.
- How to calm your mind when you're trying to sleep.

CBT may cost less.

Sleeping pills can be expensive. Your doctor visits are added costs.

Over time, CBT may cost less, especially if your insurance covers it. For CBT, you may need only six one-hour sessions. Usually, you meet with a psychologist trained in CBT for insomnia.

Are sleeping pills ever a good idea?

Sleeping pills may be helpful if you have short-term insomnia caused by a stressful event—such as a death in the family, a major illness, or a divorce.

If you're starting CBT, it may help to take sleeping pills for a short period of time. This may help you adjust as you develop new, improved sleep habits.

How can I stop taking sleeping pills?

If you've been taking sleeping pills for a long time, ask your doctor how to stop. It may take days, weeks, or months to stop safely.

When should I see a sleep specialist?

Your doctor may refer you to a sleep physician for a sleep study. In a sleep study, your body is observed as you sleep. Usually, you only need a sleep study if you might have another sleep problem, such as sleep apnea, that is causing your insomnia. Common warning signs of sleep apnea include:

- Snoring loudly or frequently.
- A bed partner says you stop breathing during your sleep.
- You are very sleepy during the day.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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