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Using Yoga to Beat Insomnia

Holistic remedies for catching quality zzzz's

By Elizabeth Barker

At the end of the day, most Americans unceremoniously collapse into bed; bodies exhausted and brains still racing from the day's excitements and emergencies. It's no wonder that, according to the National Institutes of Health, more than 70 million Americans now suffer through restless nights. Some 42 million of us reach for a quick cure in the form of a sleeping pill, helping to support a \$2 billion-a-year industry. According to Medco Health Solutions, the number of adults dosing themselves to sleep doubled between 2000 and 2004. Even worse, the number of kids (10 and up) popping prescription sleeping pills soared 85% over the same period.

"Insomnia is a common response to the normal stress of daily life," says Donna Arand, PhD, spokesperson for the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Clinical Director of the Kettering Sleep Disorders Center. So long as your insomnia isn't caused by a larger medical problem (such as hypoglycemia or depression), anti-stress mind-body practices, herbal remedies and self-care routines, can soon have you sleeping like a baby. In fact, says Oakland-based yoga teacher Ann Dyer, babying yourself might be the best way to find sound sleep. "Have a bath, put on comfy pajamas, play calming music, drink a cup of chamomile tea," Dyer suggests. "All of these things slow your mind down and contribute to better sleep."

With the pace of modern-day living in mind, Dyer has developed a relaxation method called ZYoga. "A few years ago, I noticed that the students in my yoga classes were in a constant state of exhaustion, and many suffered from insomnia," Dyer remembers. "They were living such active, stressful lives, that yoga class had become another source of struggle and strife." Determined to find a yoga-centered solution for insomnia, Dyer created a nighttime routine to lull sleep-starved yogis to rest. (Dyer's DVD, *ZYoga: The Yoga Sleep Ritual*, is available at sleepgarden.com).

Dyer's 40-minute ZYoga sessions (designed to be practiced just before bed) guide viewers through 11 hatha yoga poses, all basic enough for beginners. "Hatha yoga's poses are split into two categories — what stimulates us, and what calms us," she says. "The practice can have a strong influence on the nervous system." The session ends with several minutes of voice work and sitar-playing by Dyer, a concert vocalist and recording artist. These tenderly hummed "moon ragas" have a hypnotic effect, likely to transport even the most stressed-out souls swiftly from corpse pose to sweet dreams.

"Using ragas in yoga practice isn't common in America, but I believe in calling all of the senses," says Dyer. "We have a very primal response to sound, so the moon ragas can work very immediately in drawing us toward sleep." An ongoing clinical trial sponsored by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is now looking at yoga's impact on adults with chronic insomnia.

For the yoga-averse, other mind-body techniques can be just as snooze-conducive. "For some people, meditation, deep breathing or any relaxation-promoting practice can reduce alertness and arousal," says Arand. When you can't get to sleep or find yourself jolted awake in the middle of the night, Arand recommends this guided imagery exercise: Close your eyes and imagine an activity that you associate with tranquility (floating on a raft in a quiet lake, getting a massage at your favorite spa).



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Or try progressive muscle relaxation: Starting at your feet, tense your muscles, hold the tension as long as you can, then release. As you move up the body, breathe deeply and concentrate on the relaxation that takes over your muscles. "Either practice moves your attention away from whatever might be causing you stress," says Arand. "It keeps you from lying awake thinking: 'I need to get my taxes done! I need to do them right now!'"

Sound sleep can also come in capsule form through natural, drug-free alternatives to Big Pharma's sleeping pills. One natural option is 5-HTP, a derivative of the amino acid tryptophan that easily converts into serotonin to help initiate sleep. "5-HTP decreases the time it takes to fall asleep, as well as increasing the duration of the more important stages of sleep (REM and deep sleep)," says Koren Barrett, ND, an Irvine-based naturopathic physician. Barrett typically recommends taking 500 mg of 5-HTP a half-hour before bedtime. Since vitamins B3 and B6 and magnesium are needed to convert 5-HTP into serotonin, make sure you're getting sufficient levels of each in your diet, in a multivitamin or in supplement form.

The body-clock-regulating hormone melatonin may help to both induce and maintain sleep, Barrett says, but check the label before choosing a supplement: In a report last year from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, researchers found that most commercially available capsules contain more than 10 times the effective amount of melatonin. The body needs just .3 milligrams for restful sleep, according to study author Richard Wurtman, MD, and higher doses tend to become ineffective after a few days' use.

For an herbal route to slumberland, valerian might be your safest, most effective choice. A 2002 study from the *European Journal of Medical Research* found that the nonaddictive sedative worked just as well as the Valium-like drug oxazepam, but without any adverse side effects. Passionflower and hops also act as sleep-inducing sedatives, says Barrett, who uses all three herbs in liquid extract form. "The absorption seems to be better in liquid form," she says.

When it finally comes time to turn down the covers, your eyelids may drop more quickly if you follow the same pre-sleep pattern each night. "A regular bedtime ritual is key to achieving healthy sleep," notes Arand. Sticking to the same sleep time each night, take a moment — or many moments — to devote yourself to some healthy, tension-melting pampering. "You might try infusing your bath with lavender oil, or sprinkling a few drops of your favorite calming essential oil inside your pillowcase," suggests Lesa Werner, ND, a Beverly Hills-based naturopathic doctor. A foot massage with sesame seed oil also does the trick, says Dyer.

No matter what routine you adopt, it's crucial to resist fretting over your sleep (or lack thereof). "You might think of perfect sleep as what you had when you were much younger," says Arand. "Even if your sleep does get disrupted a few times during the night but you're still functioning well during the day, that can still be healthy. We have to have a realistic perception of what our sleep should be."

Elizabeth Barker is a Los Angeles-based health writer.



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