

# THE TIES THAT BIND: ANXIETY & SLEEP

**S**leep is that golden chain that ties health and our bodies together.

--Thomas Dekker (1577-1632)

Sleep is a basic human need at any age, as essential for good health as a proper diet and regular exercise. A good night's sleep refuels the body's energy, gives our active brains a rest, and puts us mentally in a better mood.

One of the greatest frustrations we all face at some point is not being able to fall asleep. We toss and turn, worry about the next day's activities, look at the clock and count how many minutes we have left before morning. For many, though, insomnia is much more than a one-night annoyance. Insomnia is the clinical term for those who have trouble falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, or waking too early in the morning. Caused by a multitude of physical and emotional problems, insomnia can be diagnosed as short-term or long-term, depending on when the patient feels that the loss of sleep is a problem.

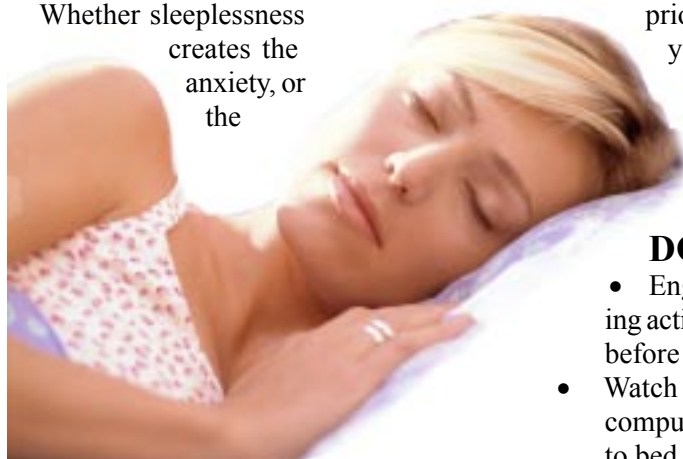
## Anxiety & Sleep

For individuals with an anxiety disorder, insomnia closes the loop on a vicious cycle of symptoms that can exacerbate these disorders. Many of the culprits that prey on anxiety sufferers — excessive stress, persistent worry, obsessive thoughts, gastrointestinal problems, and nightmares — also

rob them of their precious sleep. In addition, certain antidepressants often prescribed for the treatment of an anxiety disorder can cause sleep difficulties.

Conversely, research has shown that chronic sleep problems are associated with an increased risk of anxiety, depression and reduced quality of life. Sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, narcolepsy, and restless leg syndrome also interfere with good sleeping habits, thereby contributing to the possibility of mental impairment. The vicious cycle continues.

Whether sleeplessness creates the anxiety, or the



disorder causes the insomnia, the risks of inadequate sleep go way beyond just being tired. Skipping the necessary hours of sleep can result in many negative consequences including, poor work or school performance, increased risk of injury, and poor health, as well as, impaired judgment and bad moods. In children, sleep

disorders are linked to learning problems, slow growth, bed-wetting and high blood pressure.

## Dos and Don'ts for Sleeping Soundly

The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) recommends an average of seven to nine hours of sleep each night for most adults and even more for children and adolescents. Yet, nearly 25% of adults in America (47 million people) don't even get the minimum amount of sleep they need to be fully alert the next day. To manage anxiety symptoms, and to ensure good

health, make sleep a priority for you and your family. Here are some tips from the NSF to enjoying better sleep:

### DON'T:

- Engage in stimulating activities right before going to sleep.
- Watch TV or use the computer before going to bed.
- Eat or drink before bedtime.
- Exercise within three hours before you want to fall asleep. The ideal time to work out is early afternoon, because about 5 to 6 hours later your body temperature will drop and this will help you sleep better.

- Consume large amounts of caffeine, like soda and chocolate.
- Use nicotine products. Nicotine is a stimulant.

## DO:

- Make time for sleep. Block out seven to nine hours for a full night of uninterrupted sleep.
- Establish a regular bedtime routine for children, which includes 15 to 30 minutes of calm, soothing activities.
- Set the stage for a good night's sleep. Make sure your bedroom is cool, dark and quiet. Get into bed only when you are sleepy. If you don't fall asleep within 15 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room, and do something you find relaxing.
- Talk to your doctor if you have sleep problems. A doctor can discuss with you about the number of prescribed and herbal sleep remedies available.

Sweet dreams!

For more information about sleep and sleep disorders, visit the National Sleep Foundation at [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org).

## GABA – the Sandman Cometh

Leading researchers discussed sleep disorders, anxiety and the role of GABA at the 2004 ADAA annual conference.

Justine Kent, MD, a 2003 ADAA Junior Faculty Research Grant recipient, spoke about GABA and its effects on the brain. GABA, short for gamma-aminobutyric acid, is an amino acid that occurs naturally in the brain and acts as a neurotransmitter, a chemical that serves as a messenger in the brain. GABA helps neutralize the effects of glutamate, a brain chemical that causes excitement.

Dr. Kent explained that an imbalance of GABA is thought to underlie pathological anxiety. Studies suggest that reductions in GABA can trigger the racing thoughts, anxiety, restlessness and insomnia that characterize many of the anxiety disorders (including panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and PTSD) and keep you up at night.

GABA seems to have an important role in sleep regulation and producing sleep from wake, Thomas Roth, PhD, Director for the Sleep Center at Henry Ford Hospital, told the audience. If you wake a normal person up repeatedly during the night, they will fall back to sleep faster and faster with each disturbance. However, an insomniac cannot be woken up frequently; after the third time, they are up for good due to elevated levels of cortisol, a hormone released in

the body during stressed or agitated states. Researchers are investigating how GABA affects cortisol with respect to sleep quality, not just sleep quantity.

Research into the relation of GABA, sleep disturbances and anxiety disorder is relatively new and may lead to new treatment for anxiety disorders. Philip T. Ninan, MD, Director of the Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program at Emory University, spoke about current treatments for anxiety disorders in conjunction with GABA and Tiagabine, a medication previously used to control seizures. SSRIs are widely used as the first line of treatment for anxiety disorders and benzodiazepines are also commonly prescribed for insomnia. While there are advantages to these pharmaceuticals, further research is needed to determine their efficacy and tolerability for these co-occurring disorders. Finally, a new generation of GABA-stimulating drugs in various stages of development appear promising for treating both conditions.

*This article written by Michelle Alonso and Nina Bronk Kellner, is excerpted from the Anxiety Disorders Association of America's bimonthly newsletter, the Reporter. If you would like to subscribe, please visit our website at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org), click on "ADAA Membership" and go to "Consumer Membership," or call the ADAA.*

ADAA  
8730 Georgia Avenue, Suite 600  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
Main: (240) 485-1001  
Fax: (240) 485 - 1035  
Web: [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)