

# Balancing Insufficient Sleep

The Ayurvedic Approach

---



Each of us has suffered a restless night at some point in our lives. We've all occasionally sacrificed sleep for a cram session before an exam, or an important deadline. Many of us also know the feeling of losing sleep due to an intense emotional upset or the accumulation of stress or anxiousness. For some of us, loss of sleep is short-lived; for others, it is chronic, and we've come to anticipate losing sleep on a regular basis.

Fortunately, Ayurveda offers time-tested tools that truly support our bodies in reclaiming their natural rhythms.

## What Keeps Us from Sleeping?

Sleeplessness can be caused by elevated or chronic stress, illness, physical discomfort, environmental factors, changes in our schedules, side effects from prescribed medications, depression, anxiety, and many other factors.<sup>1</sup>



Regardless of its origins, losing sleep is hard on our bodies and can be difficult to cope with—even at the acute level.

## Serious Consequences

When sleep loss becomes a regular occurrence, it tends to trap us in a vicious downward spiral that can have far-reaching effects on our well-being.

We're exhausted, we're taxed mentally, physically, and emotionally, and our judgment is often painfully impaired. We want nothing more than to sleep, but we're often afraid that we won't be able to. And unfortunately, the fear itself can compound anxiousness and stress, further inhibiting our ability to surrender to sleep.

Our bodies crave sleep for good reason and there are actually serious health risks associated with sleep loss, which can have complicated effects on both the physiology and the mind.<sup>2</sup>

### **Possible risks of insufficient sleep:**

- Impaired judgment.
- Negatively affected moods and emotions.
- Increased risk of accidents.
- Impaired cognitive ability.
- Decreased libido.
- Increased incidence of feeling depressed (by five times that of the normal population).
- Accelerated aging in the skin.
- Difficulty losing weight.
- Increased odds of developing a more serious health problem or death.

Insomnia (the inability to sleep) can be an indicator of a more serious health problem. So if you have not already, please consult with your primary healthcare provider if you are having difficulty sleeping on an ongoing basis.

## A Ray of Hope

Whether you have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, sleep loss can feel maddening, debilitating, and sound sleep can seem further out of reach with each restless night.

But there is hope. Actually, supporting your body to return to a balanced sleep cycle might not be as difficult as you imagine it to be.

So, let's take a break from the fretful anticipation of sleeplessness and instead focus on real and meaningful tools for balancing our sleep cycles.



# The Ayurvedic Perspective

When it comes to imbalanced sleep, either *vata* or *pitta* is usually involved (and sometimes both).

Pitta typically interferes with our ability to fall asleep, while *vata* tends to interrupt sleep. *Vata* also has a tendency to wake us up in the middle of the night, which can result in us feeling unable to return to our interrupted slumber.

It is equally important to understand which of the twenty *gunas* (or qualities) are involved in sleep imbalances. We can intuitively understand that sleep requires a certain heaviness, stillness, and a distinctive quieting of the mind; these are the qualities that support our bodies in being able to surrender to sleep.

*Vata* and *pitta* however, naturally share elements of the light, mobile, subtle, and clear qualities—all of which oppose and counteract the very energies necessary for sound sleep. Further, both *vata* and *pitta* tend to trigger upward moving energy in the body whereas sleep is supported by downward moving energy.

Therefore, when excess *vata* or *pitta* are active just before (or at any point during) the sleep cycle, they can leave us feeling active, mentally alert, especially sensitive to subtle changes in our environment, utterly preoccupied with racing—or even well-organized—thoughts, and we become inclined to stay awake.

While there are certainly subtle differences between *vata* and *pitta* types of sleep disturbances, the two do not require entirely different approaches to finding balance. In fact, it can be very clarifying to understand the universal patterns.

Whether it is caused by *vata*, *pitta*, or a combination of the two, the Ayurvedic approach to balancing insufficient sleep is largely focused on helping the system to return to balance by opposing any sleep-disrupting influences with their opposites.

Simultaneously, we must support the body's natural circadian rhythms, while quieting the nervous system in the interest of reducing stress and returning to a healthier baseline state of calm. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a natural and easeful transition into sleep, and to be able to maintain that state until the body is fully rested.

## Supporting Quality Sleep

The following recommendations work to balance sleep cycles by quieting and grounding the mind, emphasizing the heavy, slow, and stable qualities in ways that specifically support sleep, embracing a daily routine that awakens our natural biological rhythms, and by reducing stress and tension in the mind and body.

These strategies subdue the excess lightness, clarity, subtlety, mobility, and upward movement that so often interfere with balanced sleep. It is also important to tend to *agni* (the metabolic fire), which Ayurveda recognizes as the foundation of optimal health.



Many of the strategies below naturally support agni and help to clear toxins—emotional and otherwise. For more detailed information on agni and how to care for it in your system, see our resource on [The Importance of Healthy Digestion](#).

## Establish a Daily Routine

Encouraging a sense of consistency in our rhythms and routines fosters a certain stability that is both grounding and deeply reassuring for the nervous system. In the context of the fast-paced modern world where stress and stimuli run rampant, a routine provides an important foundational level of support for a calmer mind and better sleep.

It also helps us to align with the natural rhythms of the day and offers a certain predictability that is very supportive of our physiology. In fact, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of a daily routine for everyone, though its content may vary based on one's constitution, current state of health, age, and environment. If this concept is new to you, you might appreciate exploring our [Daily Routine Department](#).

If you don't have a routine and just want to start with the basics, consider committing to a consistent time for going to bed and waking up (even on the weekends). If you're feeling even more ambitious, try to eat your meals at the same time each day. If your work schedule varies, you can also try to maintain more consistent work hours from one day to the next.

Of course, certain times of day have a more direct impact on our sleep cycle, namely those periods on either side of sleep—just prior to bed and immediately after waking. Observing specific practices at these times of day can be instrumental in supporting sound sleep.<sup>3</sup>

### Before Bed, Consider:<sup>3</sup>

#### **Taking a bath.**

A bath relaxes the nervous system, releases tension, and helps to quiet the mind. Use hot water for vata, warm water for pitta.

#### **Having a cup of boiled milk or chamomile tea.**

These drinks are grounding and soothing in nature. If you like, add a pinch of nutmeg, cardamom, and some ghee to the milk.

#### **Massaging your feet and scalp with warm oil.**

This practice is grounding, supports downward moving energy, and helps to soothe the mind. If you massage your scalp, be sure use a towel or some other means of protecting your pillow from the oil.

[Sleep Easy Oil](#) is balancing for vata and pitta; it helps to calm the mind and soothe the nervous system in support of healthy sleep patterns, deep rest, and improved relaxation. [Sesame Oil](#), and [Vata Massage Oil](#) are also good for vata. And for pitta, [Sunflower Oil](#), and [Pitta Massage Oil](#) are great choices, too.



## Upon Waking, Consider:

### **Abhyanga (Ayurvedic self-massage with oil).**

This practice is very grounding and nurturing. It helps to calm the nervous system and is a very potent practice of self-love. For more information and for help determining which oils would be best for you at this time, please see our resource on [Ayurvedic Self-Massage](#).

### **A morning routine that sets a calm and clarifying tone for the new day.**

Supportive practices might include a morning shower, a gentle morning walk, or a few minutes of [meditation](#), [yoga](#), or [pranayama](#).



## Practice Good Sleep Hygiene

The following practices further foster healthy circadian rhythms. Many of them are time-tested Ayurvedic suggestions that are now being embraced by modern medicine in the treatment of sleep disorders.

To start with, make the bedroom—and specifically the bed—a sacred place for sleep and sex only. This is not the place to study, read, watch TV, surf the internet, or pay bills. In addition, the bedroom should be conducive to sleep in every way possible. The temperature, the lighting (or level of darkness), the noise level, and the humidity are all potentially supportive or disruptive to sleep.<sup>4</sup>



Wherever possible, adjust the environment to meet your preferences and needs. Vata-types tend to favor warmer temperatures, softer bedding, ample covers, a nightlight, and adequate humidity. On the other hand, pitta-types usually prefer cooler temperatures, fewer covers, a firmer bed, total darkness, and less humidity. In cases where the noise level is disruptive, white noise may be beneficial for either vata or pitta imbalances.

It is important to honor whatever works best for you. Ultimately, you need to feel comfortable in the sleep environment you create for yourself. In addition, consider adopting as many of these supportive habits as possible:

**Eliminate screen time in the evening.**

Screen time of any kind is incredibly disruptive to the biological rhythms that support sleep. If you are serious about improving sleep, it is best to limit or eliminate screen time from the hours immediately before you sleep—ideally from dinner onward.

**Eliminate stimulants.**

In much the same way, stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol tend to disrupt physiological cycles essential to sound sleep.<sup>5</sup> When struggling with insufficient sleep, it is best to eliminate them entirely (or as much as possible) from your lifestyle.

**Eliminate bedtime reading.**

Reading before bed is very stimulating—especially to the eyes and the mind—is particularly pitta-provoking and can interfere with sound sleep. It is best to avoid reading in bed, and you might consider eliminating reading from your evening routine altogether.

**Eat a wholesome dinner early in the evening.**

A heavy dinner can interfere with our ability to sleep.<sup>6</sup> The best evening meals are healthy, nourishing, easily digestible, and are eaten at least three hours prior to retiring to bed.

## What If I Can't Sleep?

If you find yourself unable to sleep, it is better to get up than to force yourself to stay in bed. We want to learn to associate bed with restful sleep, not with the struggle to sleep.

For some, getting up and making a to-do list helps to clear the preoccupations of the mind and can be very helpful. If you find this to be the case, get in the habit of making the list before you go to bed each night. For others, a cup of tea or hot milk will do the trick.

Still others enjoy taking a little time for a grounding meditation or *pranayama* practice (yogic breathing exercises). You'll find what works for you, but only return to bed when you feel sleepy and genuinely ready to surrender to sleep.



## Prioritize Proper Exercise

Exercise serves the body in many different ways, provided it is done at an appropriate intensity for your constitution and current state of balance.

Exercise kindles agni (which is essential to optimal health), improves digestion, bolsters the body's detoxification mechanisms, encourages proper elimination, promotes relaxation in the body, and supports sound sleep.<sup>7</sup> However, improper exercise can disturb sleep. For instance, exercising too close to bedtime can be overly stimulating.<sup>8</sup>

Ayurveda says that the best times of day to exercise are from 6-10 a.m./p.m. In cases of troubled sleep, an evening workout should be completed at least two to three hours before bedtime.<sup>9</sup>

Vata and pitta actually have somewhat different needs when it comes to exercise, so it is also important to choose an activity regimen that is appropriate for your particular imbalances.

To balance vata, get plenty of vata-pacifying exercise:

- Make sure that your exercise routine is not overly stimulating, but gentle and grounding instead. Favor activities like walking, hiking, gentle cycling, yoga, or qigong.
- If you practice yoga, practice [vata-pacifying yoga](#) or a handful of slow and purposeful [Sun Salutations](#) each morning.

To balance pitta, observe a pitta-pacifying exercise routine:

- Make sure to exercise with relaxed effort so that it is not overly intense. Enjoy activities like walking, hiking, light jogging, swimming, cycling or yoga in the morning or evening (when it is coolest), and try to breathe through your nose the entire time.
- If you practice yoga, practice [pitta-pacifying yoga](#) or a series of gently-paced and purposeful [Moon Salutations](#) each morning.

## Reduce and Manage Stress

Because stress is so often a factor in disturbed sleep cycles, it is imperative that we reduce our exposure to stress wherever possible. That said, chronic stress tends to ramp up the stress response so that our bodies react to even benign situations as if they were profoundly threatening.<sup>10</sup>

Ayurveda recommends a number of subtle practices like meditation, pranayama, and yoga as an effective means of breaking this cycle, resetting the nervous system, and cultivating a healthier physiological response to stress. If you would like more in-depth support, please see our health guide on the topic, [An Ayurvedic Guide to Stress Management](#).

## Meditation

If you do not have a meditation practice, something simple like [Empty Bowl Meditation](#) is a great place to start.



## Pranayama

Full Yogic Breath, Ujjayi, Nadi Shodhana, and Bhramari are especially supportive of the mind, the nervous system, and sleep. Most of these should be practiced on an empty stomach. The early morning is often an ideal time.

Even five to fifteen minutes of pranayama daily can have a profound effect on our experience of stress and our overall state of mind. In addition, a few minutes of Bhramari in the evening can help to settle the system and encourage sound sleep.

## Yoga

A gentle grounding practice will typically be best for promoting healthy sleep. If vata is the main issue, favor vata-pacifying yoga. If pitta is the predominant force in your imbalance, pitta-pacifying yoga will be best.

In either case, practice during the morning will help to set the tone for a more easeful day. Any practice done in the evening should be as gentle and quieting as possible. Favor restorative poses at this time.

## Consider the Addition of Supportive Herbs

There are a number of Ayurvedic herbs that can help to balance vata and pitta, encouraging healthier sleep patterns. Some bolster the nervous system, others encourage an improved relationship with stress, some reduce excess vata or pitta throughout the system, and still others help to promote that grounding, downward moving energy that is so essential to sound sleep.

## Generally Supportive Herbs

I Sleep Soundly is a formula specifically designed to support sound sleep. These tablets help the muscles to fully relax so that the body can physically surrender to sleep. At the same time, this formula helps to soothe the mind and nervous system in support of quality sleep.

Brahmi/Gotu Kola is incredibly sattvic in nature and is renowned for its ability to support the nervous system and the mind. It is a cooling, relaxing tonic for pitta and it helps to calm vata in the mind. Brahmi/Gotu Kola liquid extract is also available.

## Herbs for Balancing Vata

Ashwagandha has long been revered for its ability to support the body in resisting stress while calming the mind. As a highly regarded adaptogen, Ashwagandha supports quality energy throughout the day and sound sleep at night. Ashwagandha tablets and liquid extract are also available.

Healthy Vata tablets help to balance vata throughout the system, supporting overall health and well-being.



**Vata Digest tablets** help to remove excess vata from the digestive tract in support of agni, which is essential to optimal health. If you prefer a powder, **Hingvastak** is the powdered form of this formula; it can be taken alone or sprinkled on your food like pepper.

## Herbs for Balancing Pitta

**Healthy Pitta tablets** help to balance pitta throughout the system, supporting overall health and well-being.

**Pitta Digest tablets** help to remove excess pitta from the digestive tract in support of agni, which is essential to optimal health. If you prefer a powder, **Avipattikar powder** is a traditional Ayurvedic formula with very similar qualities and effects.

# Finding Your Unique Path Toward Balance

While Ayurveda offers a number of effective tools for balancing insufficient sleep, working with an Ayurvedic practitioner can be incredibly clarifying and can help deliver the best results for your particular situation. That said, the above recommendations provide a solid foundation for anyone struggling with sleep imbalances.

While a lack of adequate sleep can certainly be a frustrating and debilitating condition to live with, the Ayurvedic tradition offers a very holistic approach to finding balance. As with most imbalances, when we address the deeper context of our lives and begin to correct the root cause, we are inevitably taking profound steps toward improved overall health and wellness.

We sincerely hope that we can continue to support you in finding your way to sound sleep and vibrant health.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> "An Overview of Insomnia," Web MD, last modified 29 Jul, 2012, <http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/guide/insomnia-symptoms-and-causes>.
- <sup>2</sup> Camille Peri, "Coping With Excessive Sleepiness: 10 Things to Hate About Sleep Loss." Web MD, last modified 13 Feb, 2014, <http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/excessive-sleepiness-10/10-results-sleep-loss>; "Consequences of Insufficient Sleep," *Healthy Sleep* (Harvard Medical School: Division of Sleep Medicine), last modified 18 Dec. 2007, <http://healthysleep.med.harvard.edu/healthy/matters/benefits-of-sleep/why-do-we-sleep>.
- <sup>3</sup> Vasant Lad, *The Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 211-12.
- <sup>4</sup> "Overview of Insomnia," Web MD.
- <sup>5</sup> "Slideshow: Insomnia Myths and Facts." Web MD, last modified 8 May, 2014, <http://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/living-with-insomnia-11/slideshow-insomnia>.
- <sup>6</sup> "Overview of Insomnia," Web MD.
- <sup>7</sup> Vasant Lad, *Textbook of Ayurveda Volume 1: Fundamental Principles of Ayurveda* (Albuquerque: The Ayurvedic Press, 2002), 283.
- <sup>8</sup> "Insomnia Myths and Facts." Web MD.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Claudia Welch, *Balance Your Hormones, Balance Your Life: Achieving Optimal Health and Wellness through Ayurveda, Chinese Medicine, and Western Science* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2011), 3.

