

**G**iven the hurly-burly of 21st-century living, many experts believe it's not surprising that an increasing number of people have trouble relaxing and falling asleep. 'For me, it's very hard to understand how people switch off their thoughts and become unconscious,' says Lydia, 32. 'It's not specific worries, I just can't seem to clear my mind.' As many as one in four people have insomnia which, if left untreated, can have devastating consequences.

Insomnia is either a difficulty in getting to sleep or staying asleep for an acceptable period or having disturbed sleep patterns (including waking in the middle of the night or too early in the morning), resulting in insufficient sleep. To be classified as an insomniac your sleep patterns must be disrupted at least three times each week for more than a month, causing you distress and preventing you from functioning properly during the day. 'Sometime, after a few bad

later on be able to fall asleep but have a problem staying asleep – or have a combination of both sleeping difficulties.'

## HOW MUCH SLEEP DO YOU NEED?

'This may come as a surprise,' says Neil Stanley, Director Of Sleep Laboratories at the University Of Surrey and Chairman of The British Sleep Society, 'but the norm is between three and 11 hours per night, not eight hours. Sleeping provides an opportunity for your body to repair itself and the amount of sleep you need varies from person to person. We tend to need less sleep as we get older but the key is to feel refreshed the next day. If you only have five hours' sleep but feel refreshed and able to function when you wake up, then five hours is enough for you.'

Stanley also believes that sleeping in at the weekend to make up for lost sleep during the week is not a good idea. 'It's the worst thing

you can do,' he says, 'because your body likes a regular sleep cycle. If you sleep for longer, you're also likely to have more deep sleep and if you wake during this type of sleep you may feel groggy. There's also some evidence to show that longer sleeping hours can induce headaches.'

## WHAT CAUSES INSOMNIA?

'Insomnia may be a symptom of another disease or a disease in itself,' says Dr Raymond Cluydts, Research Director at The Sleep-Wake Disorders Centre at the University Hospital Antwerp in Belgium. 'In just under half of all cases,' he says, 'the underlying cause is psychiatric (most patients with depression have insomnia as a symptom). In 20 to 25 per cent, insomnia results from organic disorders such as 'restless leg syndrome' (restlessness that occurs in your legs after going to bed) or different types of pain and medications that interfere with the sleep process. Circadian-rhythm disorders, in which sleep time may have become advanced or delayed due to a neurophysiological dysfunction or external factors such as jet lag or shift work, account for 10 to 15 per cent of cases. Primary insomnia, in which no identifiable cause for insomnia can be found, occurs in up to 30 per cent of all cases of chronic insomnia.'

Other things that can disrupt your sleep include external factors such as noise or an uncomfortable bed, taking stimulant drugs, foods or drink (including coffee) before bedtime and getting too much sleep during the day. 'Unfortunately, a lot of people don't wind down before they go to bed,' says Stanley. 'It's important to relax your brain before going to bed, which can be done in a variety of ways, such as having a hot bath or a warm drink, reading, listening to soft music or using aromatherapy. Some people are so hot-wired that they find it hard to relax and in a very small minority of cases, this may be due to a

hyper-arousal condition which is associated with a problem with part of the brain's arousal centre and can't be treated. But this is very rare and most people can usually find something that helps them relax.'

If you have done everything you can to relax and make your bedroom conducive to sleep (see *Is insomnia bad for you?* below) but still can't sleep, then you need to take a long, hard look at what's going on in your life and try to eliminate any problems and anxieties. 'I tried everything under the sun but nothing seemed to help me drift off at

nights' sleep,' says Lydia, 'I find myself daydreaming at work and it's not until my telephone rings that I realise I've drifted off.'

Insomnia doesn't necessarily occur every night but usually three or four times per week, for months, years or even indefinitely if not treated and the pattern of insomnia may change over time. 'An insomniac may have trouble getting to sleep for a few months,' says Dr Göran Hajak, a consultant psychiatrist and Head of the Sleep Disorder And Research Centre in Göttingen, Germany, 'and then

