

INSOMNIA

Insomnia is defined as difficulty in falling asleep or staying asleep. If it occurs for an extended period of time it becomes “chronic insomnia.”

Sleep deprivation can result in dysfunction of the internal organs. It can cause anxiety, fatigue, pain, loss of appetite, poor memory, constipation, and depression. Insomnia can be caused from emotional stress and depression, or by disease, drugs, or brain damage. Sometimes the cause is unclear.

Conventional Western medicine uses drugs to treat insomnia such as sleeping pills or anti-depression medications, along with behavioural and psychological therapies. The problem is that drugs can have serious side effects such as drowsiness, confusion, forgetfulness, dry mouth, and in some cases allergic reaction. Worse, they can cause dependency and in some cases can mask underlying health problems which if left undiagnosed, can have dire consequences.

TCM Definition and Treatment of Insomnia

TCM defines insomnia in terms of deficiency or excess. Examples of excess could be the result of eating late at night or consuming too much alcohol or sugar. Examples of deficiency are poor digestion or long term stress.

Excess qi usually results from a stagnant liver or by the retention of food and phlegm. Symptoms include irritability, red eyes, bitter taste, and headache with distension. Deficient qi originates from the heart, spleen, and kidney which are characterized by excessive dreaming, palpitations, dizziness, sore and weak knees, dull hair, and an inclination to be quiet.

Herbal medicine is very effective in the treatment of insomnia. Studies have shown that patients who took an herbal formula for an average of 21 – 90 days showed marked improvement and recovery. Acupuncture treatments have also shown to be effective. It is recommended that treatments start 2 – 3 times per week then reduced to once per week, and then every 2 weeks until the insomnia is fully resolved.

Herbal medicine is sometimes combined with acupuncture to enhance results. Lifestyle changes are also recommended and may include reducing the use of stimulants such as cigarettes, tea, coffee, and alcohol, as well as spicy and oily food. Exercise is also a must.

Case Studies

Treatment – Herbal Medicine

In one case, a 61 yr old man had been suffering from insomnia for over 6 years with symptoms of fatigue, shortness of breath, cold limbs, and tired eyes. After 12 days of taking a combination of prescribed herbal formulas, his quality of sleep had improved. However, after stopping the treatment, he had a tendency to wake up during the night so he extended the protocol for another 36 days at which time his symptoms resolved and he was able to sleep 6 hrs per night.

Treatment – Acupuncture

A 47 yr old woman had been suffering from insomnia for 3 years. She had trouble falling asleep and when she did she had disturbing dreams as a result of extreme mental stress in her life. Her symptoms included headaches, fidgeting, nausea, and a bitter taste in her mouth—all symptoms of excess heat. After 32 acupuncture treatments over a 5 month period, she was symptom free and able to sleep 7 hours each night.

Summary

In general, sleep medications are effective for short term situations but if a patient is experiencing chronic insomnia, herbal medicine combined with acupuncture treatments may be the most effective choice.