

Is It Time for a Sleep Aid?

It never fails that the first or second night someplace new, I relax and get cozy to rest, but I cannot sleep much at all. Despite my best efforts, restlessness wins. Even in the comfort of my own bed, I often lose the battle with sleep because my brain will not shut off or life's stressors are just too overwhelming. I know I am not alone.

In our fast-paced world, a good night of sleep can feel like a luxury. When sleepless nights become a recurring issue, we may turn to sleep aids for relief. But are these quick fixes truly a solution, or do they come with hidden drawbacks?

Sleep aids¹ fall into two main categories, over the counter (OTC) sleep aids, and prescription sleep aids. OTC sleep aids typically contain antihistamines like diphenhydramine or doxylamine succinate. Melatonin supplements also fall into this category. Prescription sleep aids include benzodiazepines (like Xanax and Ativan) and non-benzodiazepine hypnotics (like Ambien and Lunesta).

When following the appropriate dosage instructions, sleep aids can provide short-term relief from occasional sleeplessness caused by stress, jet lag, or temporary disruptions to your routine. They can help reset your sleep cycle when it's temporarily out of whack. Prescription medications can address specific sleep problems, such as difficulty falling asleep, or staying asleep. OTC sleep aids are readily available and offer a quick and easy solution... but sleep aids are not always the right answer.

OTC sleep aids can lead to daytime drowsiness, dry mouth, dizziness, and cognitive impairment, while prescription medications can cause more serious side effects, including memory problems, complex sleep behaviors (like sleepwalking), and confusion. Regular use of some sleep aids, especially prescription medications, can lead to an increase in tolerance, requiring higher doses for the same effect. Sleep aid dependence can make it difficult to sleep without them. Underlying medical conditions or lifestyle factors contributing to sleeplessness may go undiagnosed, as they often address the symptoms of

¹ Compare Sleep Aids, The Sleep Foundation, <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-aids/compare-sleep-medications>, updated March 26, 2024

sleeplessness but not the cause. As with any medication, it is important to check for drug interactions with any sleep aid you use so that you can avoid any adverse effects.

Prioritizing healthy sleep habits² is always a good first step when struggling with sleeplessness. The habits include establishing a regular sleep schedule, creating a relaxing bedtime routine, optimizing your sleep environment, getting regular exercise, and avoiding caffeine, alcohol, and heavy meals close to bedtime. With that said, there are times when it might also be appropriate to use sleep aids. OTC sleep aids can be considered for occasional sleeplessness due to travel or temporary stressors such as grief, significant transition or personal hardships. A doctor may prescribe sleep aids for short-term insomnia, often in conjunction with behavioral therapies. If you find yourself relying on sleep aids regularly, it is time to seek professional help.

Sleep aids can offer temporary relief, but they are not a long-term solution for chronic sleep problems. Consult your doctor before using any sleep aid and prioritize healthy sleep habits for long restful nights.



² About Sleep, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), <https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about/index.html>, updated May 15, 2024