Coping with Insomnia in the 3rd Age

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What is insomnia

Insomnia is a condition in which a person has problems with sleep for three or more nights a week:

1. Difficulty falling asleep, usually taking more than 30 minutes
2. Easily awakened in the night,
3. Unable to go back to sleep once awake,
4. Having poor quality and disturbed sleep.

The affected person may feel fatigued and his moods may be affected. May increase risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes.

The elderly, menopausal women with yin deficiency, stressed people, and those with nutritional deficiencies are vulnerable to insomnia.
Causes of insomnia – TCM perspective

In TCM, the heart is the main affected organ as it houses the spirit (shen 神) needed for good quality sleep. Consequently, common causes of insomnia are:

1. Over-indulgence in food damaging spleen functions resulting in accumulation of damp heat disturbing the heart.

2. Emotions that harm the liver, such as anger, cause liver qi stagnation which may develop into liver fire disturbing the heart.

3. Over-work or excessive idleness may affect the digestive function of the spleen, hence lack of nourishment for the heart.

4. A weak constitution with deficiency in blood or yin leads to lack of nourishment for the heart, or to disharmony between the heart and the kidney.
The sleep cycle

A Sleep Cycle

- awake
- twilight-zone sleep
- deep sleep
- twilight-zone sleep
- partial awakening
- REM sleep
- partial awakening
Sleep can also be classified into 4 stages: N1, N2, N3 (deep sleep) and REM sleep. When experts chart sleep stages on a hypnogram, the different levels resemble a drawing of a city skyline. This pattern is known as sleep architecture. The hypnogram above shows a typical night’s sleep of a healthy young adult.
Sleep Architecture (1)

**Stage N1:** In making the transition from wakefulness into light sleep, you spend about five minutes in stage N1 sleep. You lose awareness of your surroundings, but are easily jarred awake.

**Stage N2 (light sleep):** This stage of sleep lasts 10 to 25 minutes. Your eyes are still, and your heart rate and breathing are slower than when awake. You spend about half the night in stage N2 sleep.

(“Twilight zone sleep” described earlier consists of Stage N1 and N2 sleep).
Sleep Architecture (2)

Stage N3 (deep sleep): At age 20, you spend 22% of the time in deep sleep; at 70 that falls to 9%.

Dreaming (REM) sleep: Dreaming occurs during REM sleep; eyes dart back and forth rapidly behind closed lids. Blood pressure increases, and heart rate and breathing speed up to daytime levels. Just as deep sleep restores your body, scientists believe that REM or dreaming sleep restores your mind.

Overall, a young person at 20 spends 40% of his sleep time in good quality (deep and REM) sleep, whereas at 70 this figure falls to 28%.
Common syndromes in insomnia

1. Liver fire disturbs the heart 肝火扰心

Symptoms: many dreams, unable to fall asleep for the whole night, irritable, headache, dizziness, red eyes, bitterness in the mouth, hard stools, red tongue with yellow fur, fast taut pulse.

Therapy: “dredging” the liver, purge fire and calm the mind
(Longdanxiegan Tang 龙胆泻肝汤)

2. Heat-phlegm disturbs the heart 痰热扰心

Symptoms: irritable, chest tightness, abdominal bloatedness, burping with sour taste, dizziness, red tongue with greasy yellow fur, slippery fast pulse.

Therapy: resolve heat phlegm, harmonize the stomach to calm the mind
(huanglian wendantang 黄连温胆汤)
3. Deficiency of heart and spleen 心脾两虚

Symptoms: difficulty in falling asleep, many dreams, wake up easily, heart palpitation, fatigue, poor appetite, loose stools, pale complexion, pale tongue, thin white fur, thready weak pulse.

Therapy: Tonify spleen and nourish the heart, tonify qi and blood

(Decoction for strengthening heart and spleen 归脾汤)

4. Yin deficiency with asthenic fire 阴虚火旺

Symptoms: irritability, difficulty in falling asleep, many dreams, heart palpitation, tinnitus, dizziness, backaches, hot flash, night sweating, feverish sensation over the palms, dry throat, red tongue with little fur, thready fast pulse

Therapy: Nourish yin and remove deficiency fire

(liuwei dihuangwan and huanglian ejiaotang 六味地黄丸合黄连阿胶汤)
Preventing and treating insomnia

**Prevention**

Follow *yin yang* cycles of the body: Rest when the *yin* is at its peak at night; and work when *yang* is at its peak in the day.

Avoid associating bedroom with work, exciting entertainment, stressful activities, and stimulating drinks.

Meditation, breathing and *qigong* exercises for relaxation.

**Treatment**

Use of calming foods and herbs (e.g. lily bulb, suan zaoren 酸枣仁, pearl powder) to correct syndromes like heart blood deficiency and *yin* deficiency.

Resolve syndromes with prescriptions appropriate to the syndrome

(Consult TCM physician before taking prescriptions)
Herbs that help to improve sleep
(with blood deficiency)

- **Suanzaoren** 酸枣仁
  
  *Spine date seed*

- **Baiziren** 柏子仁
  
  *Chinese arborvitae kernel*

- **Longyanrou** 龙眼肉
  
  *Longan meat*
Herbs that help to improve sleep
(with yin deficiency)

Wuweizi 五味子
(Chinese magnolia vine fruit)

Baihe 百合
(Lily bulb)
Herbs that help to improve sleep (with internal heat)

Lianzixin 莲子心 (Embryo of lotus seed)

Zhenzhumu 珍珠母
Herbs that help to improve sleep
(suitable for most constitutions)

Fuling 茯苓
(Poria)

Lianzi 莲子
(Lotus seed)

Lingzhi 灵芝
Acupoints that are good for improving sleep quality

- 百会 (Baihui)
- 印堂 (Yintang)
神门 Shenmen

内关 Neiguan

安眠 Anmian
Recipes for insomnia

• “Nourishing & Calming Tea” 养血宁心茶

Longan meat 6g
Lily bulb 5g
Red dates 3pcs
Wolfberry seeds 枸杞子 3-6g

**Method**

Steep the herbs in hot water or boil for stronger concentration.
Wuweizi Green Tea 五味子绿茶

Wuweizi 五味子 5g
Green tea leaves 1 tsp

Method
Stir fry wuweizi over medium heat until they turn charred. Add green tea leaves together with wuweizi and steep them in hot water. Drink it during daytime.

Suitable for post-menopausal women with kidney yin deficiency
Lotus seed and lily bulb soup 莲子百合瘦肉汤

- Lotus seed 50g
- Lily bulb 50g
- Lean meat 250g
- Red dates (optional)

Helps to clear deficiency heat and nourish the heart. Mild.
• **Porridge for spleen-qi deficiency insomnia**

Fresh Chinese Yam 150g  
Fresh Lily bulb 10-15g  
Poria 10g  
Red dates 4-5 pcs  
Rice 100g

Nourishes both spleen and heart. It is also suitable for most people.
Thank you!

Please refer to book for more recipes and detailed explanations

Visit also www.renhai.com.sg

Content of book:

1. Principles of TCM
2. Herbs and formulations
3. *Yangsheng* 养生
4. Recipes for teas, soups and porridges
5. List of YouTube videos on using herbs, acupressure, etc