

Using herbal teas to help with sleep problems



Many people experience sleep problems from time to time. Often these are temporary and can be triggered by physical, mental or family issues upsetting our routine. After a week or two the problem will usually correct itself and the body will return to a normal sleep pattern. Sometimes worrying about not sleeping and lack of sleep itself can add to this disruption and make things worse.

There are some simple steps you can take to make sure that nothing is preventing your normal sleep from returning. These can include establishing a routine and making sure that the bedroom is right for you to sleep well. Diet, exercise and other activities all play a part too. Some people find that a few drops of essential oil of lavender sprinkled on the pillow at bedtime can help with sleep. More details of these ideas can be found on the NHS Choices website in their advice section on better sleep (www.nhs.uk/Livewell/sleep)

Sleeping pills are not usually recommended for routine use because they can quickly become addictive and often make you feel sluggish in the morning. Some people may be helped by using a herbal tea at bedtime as a safer alternative. If you are having sleep problems for more than a few weeks then herbal remedies can sometimes be used to provide a way to break the circle of insomnia and anxiety, and allow a natural sleep pattern to return.

Teas (or tisanes as they are sometimes called) provide a convenient way to use herbs as an aid to better sleep. They may contain one or more herbs but should ideally not have any conventional tea leaves in them as these contain caffeine and might interfere with your sleep. Herbal teas are usually sold as tea bags and are available in many supermarkets. Specialist herbal shops may also sell loose herbal teas. Most of these teas should be drunk at least half an hour before bedtime so that there is time for the ingredients to start working by the time you get into bed.

The easiest way to make a herbal tea is to put a teabag into a normal size mug and add freshly boiled water. Immediately cover the mug with a saucer to keep the heat in and prevent any oils released by the herbs from escaping. Herbal teas are best left to brew for a bit longer than a normal teabag, usually for five or six minutes. After removing and gently squeezing the teabag the herbal tea is ready to drink. Milk and sugar should not usually be added but a little honey may help if you find that the tea seems too bitter for you. If you use loose tea then its best to use a china teapot rather than metal. Make the tea according to the instructions on the packet and use a tea strainer when you pour the tea out.

You can try using a herbal tea before bedtime for three to four days. The effects may be quite gentle at first. If it seems to be helping then continue for a week or two and after that just use it as required. You are unlikely to become dependent on it but like all herbal remedies it is best not to use it for too long for a short term problem. Herbal remedies should be used as an addition to the sleep routines suggested above, not instead of them. If you are unsuccessful and if sleep continues to be a problem you might want to discuss this with your doctor. You could also discuss the problem with a herbal practitioner who will take the time to find out more about your difficulties and may be able to suggest other strategies to help you.

Herbal Practitioners are regulated by the National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH) and you can use their website to find a qualified herbal practitioner or herbal clinic near to you (www.nimh.org.uk)

Medicinal Plants traditionally used in herbal sleep remedies may include some of the following:

Chamomile, hops, lavender, lemon balm, lime flowers, oats, passion flower and valerian are all said to promote sleep when used in a herbal tea at bedtime. There are many different brands of herbal tea available. Two which are easily available from supermarkets and worth trying are:

- **Dr Stuarts Valerian Plus** - A mixture of herbs traditionally used to promote effective sleep. Best avoided in depression as it contains hops which can sometimes aggravate this condition.
- **Pukka Tea Company - Night Time Tea** - A gentle blend of herbs to help you sleep. Does not contain hops.