the Sleep Charity | Nytol

ADVICE SHEET

Sleep Aids: A Quick Guide

Some medicines available from pharmacies contain antihistamines that can cause drowsiness. Tolerance to the effects of antihistamines can develop quickly. **National and international guidelines** do advise against routine use of pharmacological interventions for insomnia.

Why do people use sleep aids?

Many people experience **short-term** sleep problems from time-to-time. Sleep aids may be considered when temporary sleep difficulties begin **affecting daily life.**

Common reasons include:

- Stress or worry
- Temporary life changes
- Bereavement or emotional upset
- Shift work or changes to routine
- Travelling across time zones (jet lag)
- Short periods of illness or pain
- Occasional insomnia

What are sleep aids?

Sleep aids are products designed to help people fall asleep or improve sleep for a **short period.**

They include:

- **Over-the-counter** sleep medicines
- **Prescription** sleep medications
- **Herbal** or natural products
- **Melatonin** (available on prescription in the UK for specific groups)

Not every sleep aid works in the same way, and not all are **suitable** for everyone.

When should they be used?

Sleep aids are generally intended for:

- **Short-term** sleep problems
- **Temporary** disruptions to sleep

They should not usually be relied upon as a long-term solution **without medical advice.**

How to get the best results

Sleep aids work best when **combined** with healthy sleep habits.

Try to:

- Keep a regular bedtime
- Avoid caffeine late in the day
- Reduce alcohol before bed
- Limit screen time before sleep
- Make your bedroom cool, dark and quiet
- Follow the instructions provided with your sleep aid

When to seek further help

Speak to your GP or pharmacist if:

- Sleep problems last longer than **4 weeks**
- You regularly rely on sleep aids
- Sleep difficulties affect your daily life
- You snore loudly, stop breathing during sleep or feel excessively sleepy during the day
- You think another **health condition** may be affecting your sleep

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thesleepcharity.org.uk

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Sleep Aids: what you need to know

Why can't I sleep?

Occasional sleeplessness is common

It may be linked to:

- Stress or anxiety
- Poor sleep habits
- Physical illness
- Pain
- Menopause
- Medication side effects
- Alcohol or caffeine
- Work schedules
- Environmental changes

Understanding the cause of your sleep difficulties is often the first step towards improving sleep.

Important things to know

Sleep aids:

- are designed for **short-term** use
- should always be used according to the **instructions**
- do not treat the underlying cause of **ongoing sleep problems**
- work best alongside **healthy sleep habits**

Can I take them every night?

Most sleep medicines are **not intended for long-term daily use.**

Using them regularly without medical advice can lead to:

- Reduced effectiveness
- Dependence on the medication
- Daytime drowsiness
- Increased risk of side effects

If you find yourself needing sleep aids frequently, it's important to **seek advice** from a healthcare professional.

What types of sleep aids are available?

Over-the-counter sleep medicines

Some medicines available from pharmacies contain antihistamines that can cause drowsiness. Tolerance to the effects of antihistamines can develop quickly. National and international guidelines do advise against routine use of pharmacological interventions for insomnia.

Always read the **patient information leaflet** and speak to a pharmacist if you're unsure whether they're suitable for you.

Prescription medicines

Doctors may occasionally prescribe sleeping tablets for **severe short-term insomnia.**

These medicines are usually prescribed for only a few days or weeks because they can become less effective over time and may cause dependence.

Herbal remedies

Some people choose herbal products such as **valerian** or **lavender.**

Evidence for their effectiveness varies, and herbal products can still interact with medicines.

Melatonin

Melatonin is a hormone naturally produced by the body that helps regulate the sleep-wake cycle.

Prescription melatonin may be recommended for certain groups of people but is not routinely used for everyone with insomnia.

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