

## Insomnia in the Recovering Alcoholic

Alcoholics with short-term as well as long-term abstinence may experience sleep problems for many months after withdrawal from alcohol.

Because insomnia is highly variable, good nights may typically be intermixed with bad nights. In the same way that physicians obtain several blood pressure readings before making the diagnosis of hypertension; similarly, it is important to obtain sleep information over several days, preferably two weeks. (A sample sleep questionnaire is included at the end of this article.)

It has been found that recovering alcoholics have trouble with sleep onset and sleep maintenance, with onset problems generally worse. (more than half of alcoholic insomniacs report sleep problems that predate alcohol dependence) In the general population, 10-15% report chronic insomnia, while more than 50% of alcoholics report sleep problems for many years prior to alcohol dependence.

In addition to pre-dependence insomnia, insomnia has been reported as a withdrawal symptom in up to 2/3 of cases. Furthermore, insomnia during early recovery has been linked to relapse. Although self-medication with alcohol is initially self-reinforcing, acute and chronic alcohol use disrupts sleep patterns, worsens insomnia and then leads to full-blown dependence.

It is an interesting clinical-research finding that insomnia questions such as "I feel I have insomnia" and "I have been unable to sleep at all for several days" are NOT particularly useful, as self-reporting patients tend to avoid these labels because of denial, stigma or fear of treatment implications. These questions tend to yield 4-6% positive yield while other insomnia questions are endorsed by 18-32% of subjects.

**SUMMARY:** Symptoms of chronic insomnia and the use of alcohol to aid sleep are common among alcoholic patients. Since insomnia is a robust predictor of relapse, it remains as a significant challenge for the alcoholic and the treatment team to institute non-alcohol alternatives to address sleep difficulties.



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