

# Do These 10 Natural Insomnia Aids Really Help You Get Better Sleep?

From cherry juice to chamomile tea to massage therapy, here's the bottom line from sleep experts.



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**Sleep medicine experts want you to know that some purported sleep aids come with unintended side effects, while others are low risk and definitely worth a shot.**

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You crawl into bed at a decent hour thinking tonight is the night you're going to get your sleep back on track. Then you stare at the ceiling, eyes wide open, mind racing, with a good night's sleep feeling more like a distant dream with every passing second.

You're not alone.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says that about 70 million Americans deal with chronic sleep problems. According to the [American Academy of Sleep Medicine](#), up to 35 percent of adults struggle with [insomnia](#), which means they have trouble falling asleep and/or staying asleep (at least on an occasional basis). And about 10 percent of people suffer from the longer-term type of insomnia, chronic insomnia, which means they find it difficult to get enough shut-eye at least three nights a week, for at least three months.

Once your doctor has ruled out other medical conditions that may be interfering with your sleep and given you a diagnosis of insomnia, treatment will typically include cognitive and behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I), lifestyle changes, and if necessary, medication. "The most effective treatment for insomnia is CBT-I," says [Alon Avidan, MD, MPH](#), a professor of neurology and the director of the [UCLA Sleep Disorders Center](#).

“CBT-I includes a number of different modalities, such as mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing exercises, stimulus control (which involves removing factors from the bedroom environment that might be perpetuating the insomnia, such as a clock or an electronic device), hypnosis, and sleep hygiene,” Dr. Avidan says. It helps retrain the brain to sleep by unlearning bad habits or thought patterns that are contributing to insomnia in the first place.

In 2016, the [American College of Physicians revamped its insomnia treatment guidelines](#) to make CBT-I the preferred first-line treatment for insomnia.

But complementary and integrative medicine approaches may also improve your sleep quality. In some cases, they’re part of CBT-I, and sometimes they can be used alongside other treatments (or on their own) to help you get back to sleep.

Some of these approaches, such as yoga or tai chi, come with little or no downside, Avidan says.

Other modalities, such as certain supplements or massage therapy, may carry the risk of interfering with other medications or treatments (or be unsafe for certain groups), so however harmless an approach might sound, it’s a good idea to let your physician know what you’re trying out (especially if you’re currently undergoing other treatments for insomnia or have another chronic health issue). The [National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH) recommends this, too.

[David Spiegel, MD](#), Willson professor and associate chair of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford Medicine and medical director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine, adds that integrative medicine techniques for insomnia can be an option before turning to medication.

If CBT-I alone isn’t working, trying something like hypnosis or biofeedback therapy carries fewer risks than [medications for insomnia](#) do, he says.

And before we even get into the natural integrative and complementary medicine approaches that might be helpful for insomnia, don’t forget to try some of the top-line do-it-yourself steps that can also support good sleep in general (whether you struggle with insomnia or not).

“Sleep is not an on-and-off switch,” says sleep expert and clinical psychologist [Michael Breus, PhD](#), author of *The Power of When*. “Your body needs

time to unwind and ready itself for shut-eye.”

Some ways to practice a good sleep hygiene routine include:

- **Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.** “While you may hate being locked into a schedule, your brain likes following a pattern,” says [Helene A. Emsellem, MD](#), the medical director of the Center for Sleep and Wake Disorders in Chevy Chase, Maryland.
- **Power down electronics.** The [Sleep Foundation](#) says that you should be device-free for 30 to 60 minutes before bed.
- **Exercise regularly.** [Research](#) indicates that individuals who exercise regularly for six months have significantly reduced [insomnia symptoms](#). That said, the time of day that you exercise may impact your sleep, says [Mark G. Goetting, MD](#), a sleep medicine specialist and associate professor at Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine. He notes that some people won’t sleep as well if they exercise close to bedtime, while others report that physical activity later in the day helps them sleep better.
- **Keep your bedroom cool.** The ideal temperature for sleep is around 65 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the [Sleep Foundation](#).
- **Eat at the same times of day.** “There’s lots of documentation that those who have irregular meals tend to have more problems with sleeplessness,” says Dr. Goetting.
- **Journal your sleep habits.** Goetting says that this practice can help you identify your natural sleep rhythms and plan your best sleep. Write down when you naturally feel tired and wake up every day.

## 10 Integrative Medicine Remedies That May Help You Sleep

If you want to try these integrative medicine approaches to treat insomnia, here’s what sleep medicine experts want you to know before you try them, as well as which ones they say are downright risky:

# 1

## Biofeedback



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[Biofeedback](#) is a therapeutic approach in which you learn how to change various physiological functions (such as heart rate, breathing, and brain waves) to improve various aspects of your health and performance. It's used for several purposes, such as helping with chronic pain, anxiety, and [urinary incontinence](#). And there's some evidence it can be used to help [people with insomnia](#), too.

Some studies have suggested possible benefits of using biofeedback for chronic insomnia, both in terms of improving sleep onset and reducing the number of awakenings, though the evidence to date is inconsistent, according to a [review published in 2019 in \*Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback\*](#).

“Biofeedback is best done with an experienced professional, at least during training,” says Goetting. “Accountability and coaching are important in any behavioral intervention.”

You may require multiple sessions of biofeedback along with accompanying interventions, such as relaxation techniques, to see results, [according to the Cleveland Clinic](#). The [Biofeedback Certification International Alliance](#) is an organization that provides certification for biofeedback practitioners. Some insurance companies will cover the cost of biofeedback for specific conditions, while others will not.



**The Bottom Line** Biofeedback therapy may help with your sleep — but if you try it, seek out someone who is certified and knows what they’re doing.

# 2

## Yoga



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A [study review published in 2020 in \*BMC Psychiatry\*](#) found that yoga can significantly improve sleep and be a useful tool in helping women manage sleep problems. (The researchers noted in their paper that fewer benefits were seen among perimenopausal and post-menopausal women, as well as women with breast cancer.)

And a national [survey](#) conducted by the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health found that more than 55 percent of people who practiced yoga reported that it helped them sleep better, and more than 85 percent reported reduced stress.

**The Bottom Line** Practice 15 minutes of simple, [yoga](#)-like poses (such as neck rolls, shoulder rolls, and arm and back stretches) to help your muscles unwind before hitting the sheets, says Dr. Emsellem. But go slowly. “The goal is to loosen your muscles to prepare your body for a good night’s sleep, not increase your [heart rate](#),” she explains.

# 3

## Hypnosis



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Hypnotherapy is a mind-body practice that involves using hypnosis — a state of consciousness where a person is focused on certain ideas or images — to change brain activity and make a person more receptive to new ideas, according to [Cleveland Clinic](#). With hypnotherapy, specific suggestions are conveyed to influence a person’s thoughts and actions. And the practice may help people with insomnia by addressing the underlying issues that are preventing you from sleeping (though it may not work for everyone).

Hypnosis can help people relax and control their physical response to stress, which by definition keeps you alert and makes it harder to fall asleep, explains Dr. Spiegel.

“One of the nice things about hypnosis is that it’s a real shift in mental state and you can feel it right away,” says Spiegel. “With a lot of other techniques, you have to learn them over weeks and months, but with hypnosis, you will know whether or not it’s going help you very quickly.”

For a [study published in \*Sleep\*](#), researchers reported that hypnosis increased the amount and duration of slow-wave sleep, suggesting that it triggered a deeper sleep (it’s worth noting the study only included 27 people). And a [review published in 2018 in the \*Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine\*](#) found that hypnosis is a promising, safe, and cost-effective treatment for sleep

problems, though the researchers noted that more research is needed to confirm these initial findings.

**The Bottom Line** If you want to give it a try on your own, Goetting says that there is little risk to practicing hypnosis as part of your bedtime routine. There are several self-hypnosis apps available, including [Relax and Sleep Well Hypnosis](#), [HypnoBox](#), [Anxiety Free: iCan Hypnosis](#), and [Reveri](#) (which Spiegel helped develop).

# 4

## Lavender



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There is some evidence to support the use of lavender as a natural sleep remedy for insomnia. A [study published in the \*Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine\*](#) evaluated the effectiveness of using [lavender essential oil](#) before bed plus practicing other sleep hygiene strategies, compared with just practicing the sleep hygiene strategies.

The study involved 79 college students with self-reported sleep problems. The ones assigned to the lavender essential oil plus sleep hygiene group wore patches with lavender essential oil on their chests before sleep. The results showed that participants in this group reported better sleep quality than those who practiced sleep hygiene alone.



It's important to note, however, that some research suggests that using lavender essential oils can affect sex hormone in the body (including [estrogen](#) and androgen) and may lead to unintended side effects, according to the [National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences](#). That's why it's a good idea to talk to your doctor before trying this remedy.

**The Bottom Line** It may help, but talk with your doctor about whether your preferred method of using lavender (whether it's tea, a scented candle, or an essential oil) comes with any undesired risks.

# 5

## Chamomile



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While chamomile is used in many teas marketed as sleep-promoting, the evidence behind this popular sleep aid is scant. In a [review published in \*Molecular Medicine Reports\*](#), researchers reported that the herb may have a [sedative](#) effect. The authors noted that chamomile has traditionally been used as a tea or aromatherapy oil to induce relaxation.

In another [study](#), researchers found postpartum women who drank chamomile tea for two weeks reported better sleep quality and fewer [depression symptoms](#). However, after four weeks, these effects didn't hold up.

But if the aroma, taste, or ritual of making that cup of tea seems to help you relax and drift off to sleep, that may be reason enough to stick with the habit. When it comes to sleep, the placebo effect can be very real, explains [Michael Grandner, PhD](#), director of the Sleep and Health Research Program at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson. “A lot of people will report better sleep with placebo treatments — people report benefits from many things that have otherwise not necessarily been shown to work.”

A [study published in 2019 in the \*Annals of Behavioral Medicine\*](#), for example, found that placebo treatments significantly improved insomnia severity, fatigue, and perceived sleep quality.

**The Bottom Line** The [NIH](#) says that chamomile is likely safe when used in the amounts found in most teas. However, the organization warns that the long-term safety of using chamomile on the skin for medicinal purposes isn’t known. The herbal treatment may also interfere with certain medicines, such as the blood thinner [warfarin](#) and [cyclosporine](#), an immunosuppressant used after organ transplants.



# 6

## Valerian Supplements



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[Valerian root](#) is usually dried and made into a tea, tablet, capsule, or tincture, according to the [Sleep Foundation](#). Some small studies have suggested that valerian — a flowering plant — may help reduce the amount of time it takes to fall asleep and promote a better sleep experience, according to [Mayo Clinic](#). But it's worth noting that the herb may be unsafe for certain groups of people (including women who are pregnant or breastfeeding), and it may lead to unwanted side effects, such as headaches, dizziness, [stomach problems](#), or sleeplessness, according to Mayo Clinic.

Also, note that the supplement may interfere with other medications you're taking, Dr. Grandner says. And it's important to remember that supplements aren't regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Grandner cautions that even though valerian has been linked to some sleep benefits, it's not a suitable treatment for insomnia disorder. "Even valerian, which has some of the strongest data, fails to beat a placebo in meta-analysis," he says.

Avidan adds that it's the mechanism that's the problem with valerian: "It can improve sleep, but in an inappropriate fashion."

**The Bottom Line** This may be a natural sleep aid to skip.

7

# Tart Cherry Juice



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Cherry juice may help promote restful slumber, because it's thought to be naturally high in [melatonin](#), a hormone that helps regulate your body's sleep-wake cycles.

A small [study of 11 subjects published in 2017 in the \*American Journal of Therapeutics\*](#) found that participants with insomnia who drank tart cherry juice for two weeks increased the amount that they slept.

**The Bottom Line** Drinking cherry juice before bed is low risk, but if you have a condition that affects your blood sugar levels (such as [prediabetes](#) or diabetes), it's best to discuss it with your doctor before you start.

8

# Melatonin



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The popularity of melatonin as a sleep aid has skyrocketed in recent years. In fact, the [NIH](#) reports that the use of [melatonin supplements](#) by adults in the United States more than quintupled between 1999 and 2018. But studies have shown that the supplement isn't an effective solution for insomnia. Grandner agrees: "Melatonin is not recommended to treat insomnia."

The NIH says that melatonin may provide some benefits for people with sleep disorders that are caused by an issue with the body's internal clock, such as jet lag. "It is safe and can support healthy sleep. It is a powerful chronobiotic and can be used to treat circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorders, but it is not effective for insomnia. Many studies now show this," Grandner explains.

**The Bottom Line** If you're struggling with sleep due to traveling across time zones, jet lag, or another situation in which you're falling asleep at a time of day other than the one you want to, consider melatonin. If your insomnia is related to something else, skip it.

# 9



# Acupuncture



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[Acupuncture](#) involves inserting tiny needles into specific points on the body. The [Mayo Clinic](#) says it's most commonly used to treat pain, but some research shows the treatment may also help with sleep.

A [review](#) of 46 clinical trials that included 3,811 people with insomnia found that acupuncture significantly improved sleep quality, compared with no treatment or sham acupressure.

Investigators also found that treating insomnia with conventional therapies plus acupuncture was more effective than using the standard treatment alone.

A 2013 [study](#) that included 180 participants with primary insomnia found that acupuncture was more effective at improving sleep quality and daytime functioning than the medicine [estazolam](#) or sham acupuncture.

The [NIH](#) says acupuncture is generally a safe therapy when it's done by an experienced and trained practitioner. But it's a good idea to discuss this treatment with your doctor before having it.

**The Bottom Line** Research suggests that acupuncture alone or used alongside other treatments for insomnia may help with sleep.

# 10

# Massage



Stocksy

A massage might do more than loosen tight muscles. In a [study published in 2022 in \*Menopause\*](#), researchers analyzed 70 postmenopausal women. They found that the participants who had a 20-minute [foot massage every day for a week reported sleeping an hour more per night](#), compared with the control group.

And a [study published in the \*Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention\*](#) found that back massages helped caregivers of cancer patients sleep better, while also decreasing stress hormones, blood pressure, pulse rates, and [anxiety symptoms](#).

**The Bottom Line** Goetting says that massage (done by you or someone else) is most effective if it's done regularly as part of a bedtime routine. "The massage itself is good, but it's much much better if it's part of winding down. If it's random and done during the day, it means less," he says.

*Additional reporting by Katherine Lee.*