



➤ Kick your insomnia for good by creating a simple and restful nighttime routine

# Sweet Slumber

Leslie Bradley remembers lying awake as a child, unable to sleep. "I've been something of an insomniac my entire life," says the 56-year-old owner of Blue Spruce Yoga in Lakewood, Colorado. But after she contracted West Nile virus in 2004, her sleepless nights became intolerable.

> BY NORA ISAACS > PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH KEHOE

"I was in really bad shape," Bradley says. "I couldn't sleep at all without taking drugs like Ambien."

After the prescription sleeping pills became less effective, Bradley decided to explore an alternative route, making an appointment to see Ayurvedic doctor John Douillard, director of the LifeSpa School of Ayurveda in Boulder, Colorado. He put Bradley on a regimen of herbs, tea, self-massage, and breathwork. He also helped her understand the best bedtimes for her body type and encouraged her to make changes to her lifestyle, such as eating a bigger lunch, and not teaching evening yoga classes.

Drawing on her yoga background, she began doing Sarvangasana (Shoulder-

stand), Halasana (Plow Pose), and restorative poses before going to bed. Within three months, Bradley was off the drugs. "All those things combined have basically cured my insomnia," she says. "I feel much stronger and more solid, more vibrant."

Insomnia—the inability to get to sleep or to sleep soundly—can be either temporary or chronic, lasting a few days to weeks. It affects a whopping 54 percent of adults in the United States at one time or another, and insomnia that lasts more than six weeks may affect from 10 to 15 percent of adults at some point during their lives. To get a decent night's sleep, many Americans are turning to pills. Last year in the United States, about 42 million sleeping pill prescriptions were filled, an increase

## Ayurvedic sleep aids

**First diagnose the type of sleep problem you have, then treat it with remedies tailored to your specific imbalance.**

## vata

A vata imbalance—where you wake up in the middle of the night (after 2 a.m.) and have trouble falling back to sleep—is the most common. Before going to bed, rub your head and feet with warm sesame oil or take a bath infused with fennel, orange, and tulsi oil. You can also drink tea made from brahmi, an Ayurvedic herb known as a nerve tonic. Or try hot almond milk with

any or all of the following: chopped dates, coconut flakes, cardamom, ginger, or honey. (Find the herbs, oils, and teas at [www.banyanbotanicals.com](http://www.banyanbotanicals.com).)

Ayurvedic doctor John Douillard also recommends a breathing exercise and a short meditation before bed. Try the cooling Chandra Bhedana (Moon Breath) for five minutes. Breathe in through the left nostril and out through the right, closing the opposite one. Follow this with 30 seconds of Bhastrika (Bellows Breath) by taking full, deep breaths like a bellows in and out through your nose, using your full lung capacity. Afterward, do a minute of meditation. Repeat this until your agitating thoughts subside.

If you wake in the middle of the night, get up and have chamomile tea. Don't just lie there thinking.

## pitta

Pitta-based insomnia is the diagnosis if you either have trouble getting to sleep or you wake up before 2 a.m. and can't get back to sleep. Before bed, Douillard recommends having a cup of brahmi tea or drinking warm almond milk, as described for vata types. Try some aromatherapy: Put a few drops of sandalwood, marjoram, or benzoin resin oil (which is vanilla scented) into your bath. You can also massage warm ghee (clarified butter) onto your head and the bottoms of your feet. Then do five minutes of Ujjayi breathing (close the root of the throat and breathe through your nose audibly). Finally, follow this with a minute or two of meditation.

## kapha

According to Douillard, kapha-based insomnia is rare, but if you got to bed early and find yourself involuntarily awakening before 9 p.m., make yourself a cup of tea: Mix a teaspoon of brahmi with honey, stir it up, and drink. Give yourself a head and foot massage with olive oil, olive and mustard or sesame oil, or mustard oil alone. Aromatherapy works particularly well for kaphas: Try putting a blend of marjoram, frankincense, rose, and ylang-ylang essential oils into a hot bath. Just before you go to bed, practice two full minutes of Bhastrika (Bellows Breath) followed by a one-minute meditation.

## > restful routine

of 60 percent since the year 2000. But as Bradley discovered, drugs aren't always effective, some have negative side effects, and worst of all, as soon as you stop taking them, the insomnia often returns.

"Sleeping pills are not always a cure; they treat the symptom but not the underlying problem," explains Sat Bir Khalsa, a Kundalini Yoga teacher who's also an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and a neuroscientist at the Division of Sleep Medicine of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Beneath the symptoms of insomnia are the anxiety, fatigue, and stress that our increasingly fast-paced world seems to be creating. These days, who hasn't worked long hours without taking a break, binged on too much caffeine, or left the cell phone on 24-7?

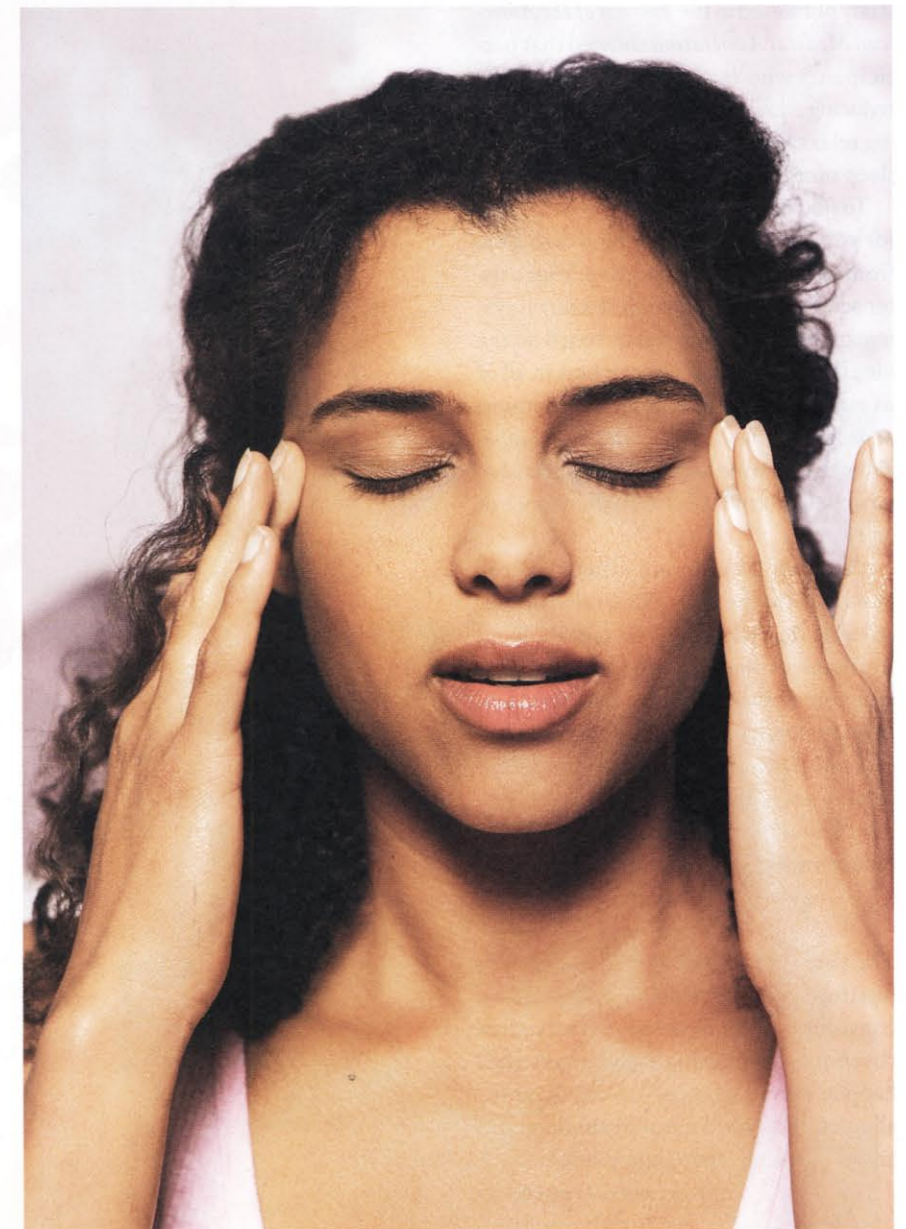
You may feel that you've adapted to the intense rhythm that modern life requires, but if you're experiencing sleepless nights, your nervous system is probably rebelling. It may be stuck in a state known as arousal, where your sympathetic nervous system is triggered. In this state your mind will race or your palms might sweat. Your body will secrete more stress hormones, and your temperature and metabolic rates will rise, as will your heart rate.

"There is very good evidence that people with chronic insomnia have elevated levels of arousal in general," Khalsa says. "And some insomniacs have higher levels right before they go to sleep." But Khalsa, who is studying how a form of Kundalini Yoga breathing called Shabad Kriya helps people with insomnia, offers good news: "Treating the arousal should treat the insomnia." By creating a routine of soothing rituals, you can bring your nervous system back into balance and transform your sleep patterns for good.

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## Self-Soother

A relaxing facial massage with warm, unfiltered organic sesame oil can soothe your nervous system and help you get a better night's sleep.



# > before bedtime

> SEQUENCES BY ROGER COLE

## RITUALS FOR RELAXING

Whether it's yoga to reduce muscle tension, breathing to slow the heart rate, or an herbal massage to calm a racing mind, a simple routine can be the most effective and safest road to a better night's sleep. There is growing evidence that small behavioral changes can make a big difference in getting some good shut-eye. A 2006 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that participants who made modifications like reducing stimuli in the bedroom and learning relaxation techniques improved their sleep more than those who took drugs.

To find out which rituals will work best for you, it helps to understand insomnia from an Ayurvedic perspective. Yoga's sister science and India's oldest known system of medicine, Ayurveda is based on the idea that the life force that exists in all of us manifests as three different energies, or *doshas*, known as *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. Though everyone has some of each dosha, most people tend to have an abundance of one or two.

Vata, ruled by air and ether, governs movement in the body. Pitta, ruled by fire, governs digestion and the metabolism. And kapha, ruled by earth and water, governs your physical structure and fluid balance. Ayurveda categorizes insomnia as a vata imbalance, because vata is controlled by air—and air controls the nervous system. Calming yoga and Ayurvedic rituals reduce vata in the body.

## KNOW YOUR TIMING

The first step to feeling well rested is to institute a regular bedtime. Maintaining consistency will help keep your circadian rhythms—the biological changes that happen every 24 hours—steady. Eventually, your body will naturally understand and crave sleep during these hours.

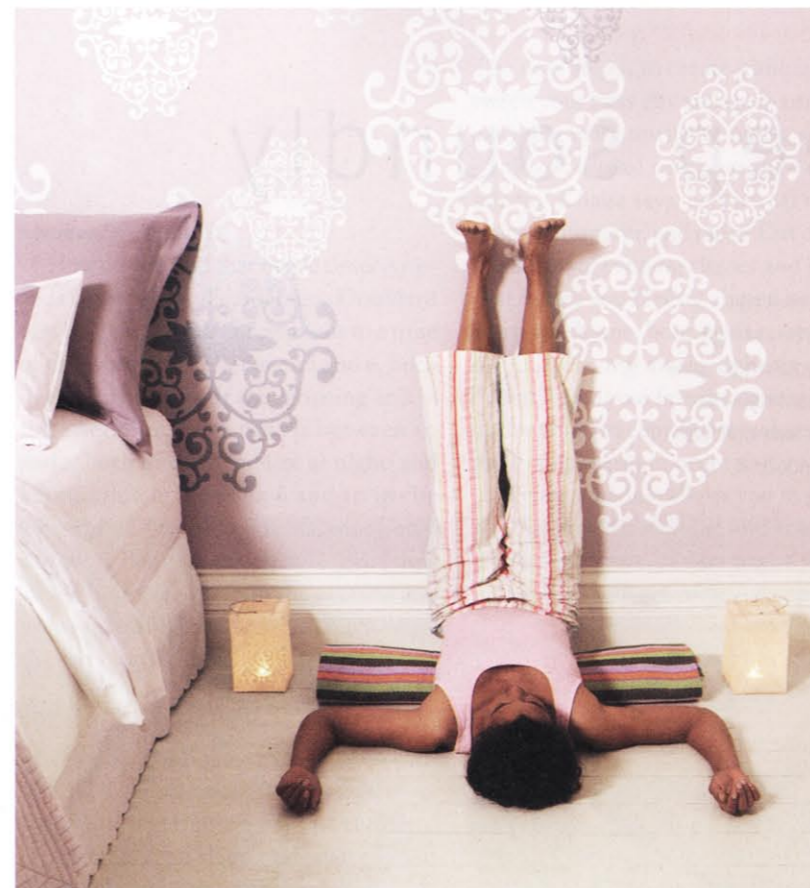
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### Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), supported

**Benefit** Quiets the nervous system.

Fold one or more blankets and place them on a chair so they cover the entire width of the seat. Stand facing the chair in Tadasana (Mountain Pose). On an inhalation, reach your arms up overhead and lengthen your spine. Exhale and fold forward until your forehead rests on the blankets. Rest your arms, including your elbows, on the blankets so they do not slide off when you relax them completely. Stay here for 3 to 5 minutes or as long as you're comfortable. Inhale as you come out of the pose.



### Viparita Karani (Legs-up-the-Wall Pose)

**Benefit** Triggers relaxation response, slowing heart, breath, and brain waves.

Bring a folded blanket or a bolster about 6 inches away from a wall (or farther away if your hamstrings are tight). Sit sideways on the support, with the right side of your body against the wall. On an exhalation, slowly turn to your right, lowering your shoulders down to the floor as you swing your legs up the wall. Adjust yourself so that your sitting bones drop down slightly between the support and the wall, the back of your pelvis rests on the bolster, and your shoulders rest on the ground. Bring your arms into a position that supports the opening of the front of your chest, whether out to your sides or reaching overhead on the floor. Relax your legs, face, and jaw. Stay here for 5 to 15 minutes. To come out, slide back off the support, turn to the side, and stay here for a few breaths before sitting up. You can do this right before bed or earlier in the evening. Make sure you don't fall asleep in the pose; save your sleep for when you are in bed.

### 2:1 Ujjayi Pranayama (Victorious Breath)

**Benefit** Calms the nervous system.

Come to a comfortable seated position and breathe normally. Start Ujjayi breath on an exhalation: With your mouth closed, slightly close the root of your throat as though you were whispering and exhale for 2 counts. You should hear a smooth, audible sound (akin to the ocean, the wind in the trees, or even Darth Vader) coming from deep in your throat as you breathe out. Release the restriction in your throat and inhale normally for 1 count. As you become more adept, increase the counts to any ratio of 2:1, such as 4 counts exhaling to 2 counts inhaling or 6 counts exhaling to 3 counts inhaling. Do this breath for 3 to 5 minutes, followed by 10 to 15 minutes of meditation.



# > sleep soundly

## Side Sleeping

**Benefits** Helps keep spine aligned and reduces snoring.

Get into bed and turn to one side. Put a pillow between your knees and another under your head for support. Your head pillow should be just high enough to prevent your neck from side bending up or down; your whole spine should be straight when viewed from the side. Draw your bottom elbow and shoulder forward far enough so you do not lie directly on your arm. Optionally, place a third pillow in front of you and support one or both hands on it.



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How do you find that magic time? Ayurveda offers helpful guidelines. Douillard says that each dosha corresponds to a time of day: Vata time is between 2 and 6, both in the early hours of the morning and in the afternoon; pitta time is between 10 and 2, both midday and late at night; and kapha time is between 6 and 10 in the morning and evening. Ideally, you should start your bedtime rituals during the slow kapha hours of 6 to 10 in the evening and head for bed before 10 p.m., which is when the fiery pitta time begins.

## TUCK IN EARLY

Although eight hours has long been considered the ideal length for a night's sleep, Douillard says that it's not just the number of hours you sleep that matters, but the time of day you go to sleep as well. He insists that our bodies naturally want to arise around 5 a.m., since humans started their day around daybreak before the advent of modern technology. So, if you go to bed at midnight and wake up at 8 a.m. (a lazy kapha hour) you'll probably feel groggy even though you've had the recommended eight hours of sleep. But if you hit the pillow before 10 p.m. and arise before 6 a.m. (during lively vata time), you'll likely feel refreshed and ready to go.

## Zero-Point Release

**Benefit** Releases craniosacral tension.

**Caution** Don't use this position if you are prone to snoring or sleep apnea. Lie on your back in Savasana (Corpse Pose). Bring your hands behind your head with the right hand touching the back of the head and the left hand on top of the right. The hands should be underneath the occipital ridge (the prominence at the base of the skull). Allow your elbows to rest on the bed and let your neck release into your hands so that your head is in slight traction. This is a great position to fall asleep in, although you don't want to stay here all night with pressure on your hands and your shoulders stretching upward.

## CREATE A WIND-DOWN PERIOD

The next step is to create some space between your busy day and sleep time. "You can't just work until 9 at night, and then stick your head on the pillow and fall asleep," Khalsa says. So turn off the television, computer, and radio. Cut down on or eliminate evening classes and exercise that leaves you feeling amped up. When you come home, honor this transition by playing relaxing music, lighting candles, or putting on your favorite pajamas. Think of the yoga precept of *pratyahara*: Withdraw your senses in order to turn inward.

If your schedule allows you to practice yoga only in the evening and you enjoy a vigorous practice, be sure to end your session with a sequence of slow, passive poses. (Go to [yogajournal.com](http://yogajournal.com) and type "Yin Yoga" or "restorative yoga" in the search box for sequence ideas.)

## NOSH AND NIBBLE

The diet mantra "Don't eat before bed" isn't always the best advice. Some folks benefit from nighttime noshing. "When you sleep, you are repairing your tissues," says Aadil Palkhivala, a certified Ayurvedic

## CDs to sleep by

*Savasana, the Guided Relaxation of Yoga*, by Aadil Palkhivala

A progressive relaxation to improve sleep.

[www.yogacenters.com](http://www.yogacenters.com)

*zYoga: The Yoga Sleep Ritual*, by Ann Dyer, DVD/CD

Includes a sleep yoga ritual, guided relaxation, and a guidebook.

[www.sleepgarden.com](http://www.sleepgarden.com)

*Health Journeys: A Meditation to Help You with Healthful Sleep*, by Belleruth Naparstek

Guided imagery that soothes and distracts the mind from stressful thoughts.

[www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com)

*Sleep Better*, by Michael Reed Gach

Gentle yoga stretches, breathwork, and guided self-acupressure to relieve stress and enhance sleep.

[www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com)

*PM Yoga Meditations: Guided Meditations for an Evening of Relaxation & Restful Sleep*, by Gael Chiarella

Four 15-minute meditations for stress relief.

[www.healthjourneys.com](http://www.healthjourneys.com)