(medications for depression), decongestants (medication to unblock your nose during colds), too much thyroid hormone, beta blockers (for high blood pressure) and corticosteroids reduces the quality of sleep.

A Helping Hand

In order to get your sleep back to normal, the most important thing to do is determine what is causing the poor sleep. For example, if you are sleeping poorly because you get acidity after meals at night, your insomnia will not go until you get the acidity treated first. Similarly, if you share a bedroom with a room-mate who is noisy or active when you are trying to sleep, it will hinder your sleep. If you are a hard-working student who has stayed up all night for an exam, don't expect your sleep to return back to normal the next day. It takes time for your body to adjust to changes to your sleeping patterns and balance your 'sleep hormones' before your sleep cycle becomes normal again.

In the UK, non-medical interventions are the first line of treatment for insomnia. Treatments include counseling for those who have had a bereavement or going through stress, cognitive behaviour therapy to alter behaviour and negative thinking patterns, keeping a sleep diary and lifestyle advice.

Unlike in Bangladesh, British doctors are reluctant to prescribe sleep-inducing medications to patients because these only relieve the symptoms but not the cause of the poor-sleep itself. Sleeping pills also have a large number of side-effects, and patients can easily become addicted to them. However, some doctors do prescribe short acting 'benzodiazepenes' to patients with acute sleeping problems for a short-term, such as those who have had surgery or an accident and cannot sleep due to intense pain.

If you are currently taking sleeping tablets, then make sure you take it at night before going to bed, as sleeping pills makes you drowsy and thus more prone to accidents. The only long-term indication for sleeping pills is 'chronic insomnia', in which a person is unable to sleep well for more than three weeks.

What is the best way of improving you sleep? A good night's sleep takes only a few simple steps. Follow these, and I can assure that your sleep will dramatically improve over time:

1. Have a specific wake-up and sleeping time in your mind every day. Stick to these times seven days a week, even if you struggle to successfully wake-up and sleep at the planned times. Doing this will eventually train your body to reset its own natural sleeping rhythm (called the 'circadian' rhythm).
2. Don't waste time lying on your bed trying to force yourself to sleep. Go to bed only when you are tired and sleepy. Let your body crave for sleep. This practice teaches your brain that the bed is for sleep only, not for procrastination.
3. Try to set up a pre-sleep routine. Have dinner, watch some relaxing television programmes, have a glass of warm milk prior to going to bed. Doing these everyday before going to sleep makes the brain associate these activities with sleep, and will naturally cause drowsiness when you repeat them for a few days.
4. If going to sleep at night is difficult, ensure that you do physically demanding activities throughout the day, especially in the early evening. Do not take naps in the afternoon if sleeping does not come easily at night.
5. Make sure you put off your lights before going to sleep. If it is difficult to make your room dark, try wearing an eye-mask.
6. Do not watch television, make phone calls, eat or study while lying on your bed. This confuses the brain and makes it associate the bed with high-energy activities rather than sleep.
7. If you are a worrier, stop spending hours lying down in darkness worrying about things that you have to do tomorrow. Write down all your worries on a piece of paper and keep it on your bedside table. Tell yourself you shall deal with the problems the next day, and forget about them until the morning.
8. No tea, coffee, chocolates or caffeine-containing food at least five hours before your sleeping time.
9. Alcohol and cigarettes are 'stimulants' they wake up your brain and stop it from relaxing. Alcohol may make you sleepy initially, but as soon as the effect of alcohol has worn off, you will wake up again.
10. Do not eat large meals or very-spicy food for dinner, as these may cause gastric reflux, bloating and discomfort. Eat sleep-inducing foods such as fish, bananas and warm milk.
11. Ensure your room temperature is comfortable. Wear cool, light clothes in hot summer nights and cover yourself with a cosy blanket or quilt in a shivery, winter night.
12. Have a mattress that is neither too soft nor too hard. A poor mattress is bad for you back and causes back-pain, making your sleep worse.
13. If you have tried to go to sleep for 30 minutes or more without success, it often makes you quite anxious as you start wondering why you cannot go to sleep. If this is the case, get up from bed, go to another room and distract yourself by reading a magazine or looking outside the window for a while, then try going to sleep again.
14. Do not stress yourself by constantly counting your sleeping hours, such as thinking "It's one in the morning, and I have to wake up for office at seven." This adds stress and makes you anxious, making it even harder to relax yourself. Sleeping for 5 hours with a relaxed mind is many times better than sleeping for 10 hours with a stressed and anxious mind.

The methods mentioned here have been tried and tested by millions across the world, and there is no reason why this will not work for you. Be positive, but don't expect miracles overnight. It takes three-four weeks for your body and mind to get used to sleeping routines, so be motivated, patient and hope for the best. Remember, a night of poor sleep today means a miserable, glum day tomorrow. If, however, none of these tips work for you, definitely go and see your doctor. The Sleep Council, www.sleepcouncil.com, offers an extensive range of information on all types of sleep disorders and ways of tackling them, so please do visit the site if you require further information. Until then, have a good night!

(The author is a graduate of the Human Bio-Medical Sciences from the University of London, and is currently a finalist student-doctor at St. Bartholomew's and the Royal London Medical School, UoL)