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3 Best Forms of Exercise to Ease Insomnia and Improve Sleep

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | July 21, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Insomnia affects about 22% of adults worldwide and raises the risk of depression, Alzheimer's disease, and cardiovascular events, while also draining energy, focus, and overall health
- A review of 22 clinical trials found yoga, tai chi, and walking to be the top three forms of exercise for improving sleep quality, duration, and efficiency in people with insomnia
- Walking stood out for reducing insomnia severity the most, and moderate-intensity walking is safe to repeat daily without the health risks linked to excessive vigorous exercise
- Yoga increased total sleep time by nearly two hours per night, while tai chi improved both subjective and objective sleep measures, with benefits lasting months or even years after training
- Benefits from walking and tai chi were seen in as little as four to 12 weeks, showing that consistent, moderate activity is more effective for long-term sleep improvement than intense, high-volume workouts

Insomnia affects up to 22% of adults worldwide, according to BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine, and it's far more than just an inconvenience at night.[1] This condition — characterized by difficulty falling asleep, waking up often during the night, waking too

early, or feeling unrefreshed in the morning — doubles your risk of depression, raises your odds of developing Alzheimer's disease by 50%, and increases your risk of cardiovascular events by 45%.[2]

Left unaddressed, it drains your physical and mental resilience, erodes your focus, and accelerates long-term health decline. People living with insomnia often find that the problem doesn't stay in the bedroom. Poor sleep bleeds into every waking hour, bringing fatigue, mood swings, impaired memory, and slower reaction times. Chronic insomnia disrupts hormone balance, weakens your immune system, and even affects metabolic health, making it harder to maintain a healthy weight and blood sugar.

The health and economic costs mount quickly, with rising medical bills and lost productivity compounding the burden. Conventional treatments like prescription sleep aids or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) come with risks and limitations. Sleep medications cause dependence and other serious health risks, and CBT — while highly effective — is costly and difficult to access due to a shortage of trained providers.

This gap leaves many people searching for an effective, low-cost, and sustainable option that improves sleep without side effects. A 2025 research offers a compelling solution: certain forms of exercise outperform others when it comes to restoring healthy sleep patterns. Evidence now points to three accessible, low-risk activities that deliver measurable benefits for insomnia sufferers.

Research Pinpoints the Best Workouts for Restful Sleep

In an analysis published in BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine, researchers examined 22 randomized controlled trials involving 1,348 adults diagnosed with **insomnia** or significant insomnia symptoms.[3] They compared 13 different interventions, including seven forms of structured exercise, to determine which offered the greatest improvements in sleep quality, duration, and efficiency. Three — yoga, tai chi, and walking — stood out above the rest.

- **All participants had measurable sleep difficulties —** Interventions were compared against "active controls," which included things like usual care, lifestyle advice, or stretching. These controls are important because they involve some degree of engagement and attention, meaning the improvements seen with more structured exercise are likely due to the exercise itself, not simply increased social interaction or activity.

- **Yoga produced the largest increase in total sleep time —** Sleep diary data showed yoga increased total nightly sleep by about 111 minutes compared to active controls. It also improved sleep efficiency — the percentage of time in bed actually spent sleeping — by 15.6% and reduced time awake after initially falling asleep by nearly 56 minutes.

  Sleep onset latency (the time it takes to fall asleep) was reduced by about 29 minutes. These changes are considered clinically meaningful and translate to waking up fewer times, falling asleep faster, and feeling more rested in the morning.

- **Tai chi improved both subjective and objective sleep outcomes —** Subjective measures (like sleep diaries) showed tai chi participants slept about 52 minutes longer, spent 36 fewer minutes awake after initially falling asleep, and fell asleep about 25 minutes faster.

  Objective tools such as actigraphy — a wrist-worn device that tracks movement to estimate sleep and wake times — also showed an increase in total sleep time of 24 minutes. These improvements were not only significant but, in some cases, persisted months to years after participants completed the structured programs, highlighting tai chi's long-term impact.

- **Walking reduced insomnia severity more than other activities —** On the Insomnia Severity Index (ISI), walking reduced scores by an average of 9.6 points compared to active controls — a large effect size that signals fewer nighttime awakenings, less trouble falling asleep, and reduced daytime fatigue. Walking also ranked

highest in the probability of being the best intervention for ISI improvements, making it particularly valuable for reducing the overall burden of insomnia symptoms.

- **Walking is an activity you can safely repeat daily —** While the BMJ study grouped walking with jogging, evidence from cardiologist Dr. James O'Keefe shows why sticking with moderate-intensity exercise, like walking, is the smarter long-term choice.[4]

  Their research found that while sedentary people see significant survival and health gains when they start exercising, excessive vigorous exercise — such as repeated full-distance triathlons — erases many of those benefits and raises atrial fibrillation risk by up to 800% in middle-aged adults. By contrast, in the case of moderate-intensity activity like walking, you can't overdo it — more is better and not associated with the risks of overtraining.

Exercise Led to Sleep Improvements Quickly

Some interventions improved insomnia in as little as four weeks, while others lasted up to 26 weeks. Notably, tai chi and walking both showed meaningful benefits even in programs lasting 12 weeks or less, which suggests you do not need to commit to a year-long regimen to experience measurable improvements in sleep.[5]

- **Comparative rankings revealed clear leaders —** When all interventions were ranked using statistical probability models, yoga was most effective for increasing total sleep time and improving sleep efficiency, tai chi ranked high for improving both subjective and objective sleep quality, and walking topped the list for reducing overall insomnia severity.

  Other exercise combinations, like aerobic plus strength training, produced benefits but were generally less effective than these top three approaches.

- **Underlying biological mechanisms explain the results —** The researchers noted that yoga's controlled breathing, body awareness, and relaxation components are linked to increased activity in the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps your body transition into restful states.

  Tai chi's slow, rhythmic movements paired with mindfulness have been shown to reduce stress hormone levels, lower inflammation, and improve circadian rhythm regulation — biological processes that are often disrupted in insomnia. Walking increases energy expenditure during the day, which promotes deeper sleep at night, and also helps regulate melatonin secretion, the hormone responsible for triggering sleep onset.

- **These activities influence brain and body systems tied to sleep regulation —** Exercise stimulates neuroplasticity, your brain's ability to adapt and form new neural connections, in regions like the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex — areas involved in sleep-wake regulation.

  Increased brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) levels from regular movement further support healthy sleep architecture. Improvements in cardiovascular function and reduced systemic inflammation also contribute to better sleep stability and fewer nighttime disruptions.

5 Ways to Use Exercise for Better Sleep

The latest research leaves no doubt — exercise is one of the most effective natural tools for improving sleep. But not all activity delivers the same benefits, and doing too much of the wrong type undermines your health. Here's how to put the science into action while protecting your long-term well-being.

1. **Make walking your daily anchor activity —** Walking consistently ranks as one of the top interventions for reducing insomnia severity, and it's an exercise that can't be overdone when kept at a moderate pace. Moderate-intensity walking — fast enough

to leave you slightly breathless but still able to converse — offers ongoing benefits for sleep, mood, and overall health without the risks of overtraining.

2. **Add yoga to expand total sleep time —** Yoga's blend of movement, controlled breathing, and relaxation techniques not only boosts flexibility and reduces stress but also increases nightly sleep by nearly two hours in some insomnia sufferers. Even short sessions, done consistently, improve both sleep quality and efficiency.

3. **Use tai chi for long-lasting sleep improvements —** The slow, rhythmic movements of tai chi reduce stress hormones, lower inflammation, and help regulate your body's internal clock. Benefits have been shown to last months — or even years — after completing a structured program, making it a smart long-term investment in your sleep health.

4. **Exercise earlier in the day —** Timing matters. Aim to complete your exercise at least three hours before bedtime. Late-night vigorous activity overstimulates your nervous system, delays melatonin release, and interferes with your ability to wind down. Walking, yoga, and tai chi earlier in the day help prime your body for nighttime rest.

5. **Be consistent, not extreme —** Sleep benefits from exercise build over weeks and months of steady practice. Going "all in" with high-intensity routines might feel productive at first, but research shows this approach backfires for both heart health and sleep quality. Pick activities you enjoy, stay at a moderate effort, and make them a part of your daily rhythm.

   For optimal sleep, combine regular exercise with good sleep hygiene, including maintaining a dark bedroom, getting morning sunlight exposure, and avoiding blue light before bedtime. For even more strategies to enhance your sleep, read my comprehensive list of **33 healthy sleep habits**.

FAQs About Exercise for Insomnia

Q: What types of exercise are most effective for improving insomnia?

A: Research shows that yoga, tai chi, and walking are the top three exercises for easing insomnia symptoms. Yoga is especially effective for increasing total sleep time and improving sleep efficiency, tai chi delivers both short- and long-term sleep quality improvements, and walking reduces overall insomnia severity while boosting daytime alertness.

Q: How does yoga help people with insomnia sleep better?

A: Yoga combines gentle movement, controlled breathing, and mental focus to activate your parasympathetic nervous system. This reduces nighttime awakenings, shortens the time it takes to fall asleep, and leads to deeper, more restorative rest.

Q: Why is tai chi effective for long-term sleep improvement?

A: Tai chi's slow, mindful movements lower stress hormones, reduce inflammation, and improve circadian rhythm regulation. These effects help you fall asleep faster, stay asleep longer, and maintain better sleep patterns even months after starting the practice.

Q: How does walking improve sleep quality?

A: Regular walking during the day, especially in natural light, supports healthy melatonin production and stabilizes your circadian rhythm. This makes it easier to fall asleep at night, reduces nighttime waking, and improves overall sleep satisfaction.

Q: How soon will I notice improvements in sleep from exercise?

A: Benefits from walking and tai chi have been documented in as little as four to 12 weeks, with some gains continuing long after structured programs end. Consistency is more important than intensity.

Sources and References

- [1, 2, 3, 5] BMJ Evidence-Based Medicine July 15, 2025
- [4] Missouri Medicine March-April 2023; 120(2): 155–162