

# Web searches for insomnia surged at height of COVID-19 stay-at-home orders

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A study found a significant increase in the number of online search queries for "insomnia" between April and May 2020, when governments across the U.S. and around the world implemented stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results show there were 2.77 million Google searches for insomnia in the U.S. for the first five months of 2020, an increase of 58% compared with the same period from the previous three years. While searches for insomnia trended downward from January through March 2020, consistent with prior years, they surged upward in April and May 2020. This increase also was associated with the cumulative number of COVID-19-related deaths in the spring.

"I think it's safe to say, based on our findings as well as those from survey studies showing an increased level of insomnia symptoms in certain populations, that a lot of people were having trouble sleeping during the first months of the pandemic," said lead author Kirsi-Marja Zitting, who has a doctorate in physiology and

neurobiology and is an instructor in medicine and associate neuroscientist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

The study is published online as an accepted paper in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*.

Insomnia involves difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, or regularly waking up earlier than desired, despite allowing enough time in bed for sleep. Daytime symptoms associated with insomnia include fatigue or sleepiness; feeling dissatisfied with sleep; having trouble concentrating; feeling depressed, anxious or irritable; and having low motivation or energy.

The researchers analyzed Google search data in the U.S and worldwide between Jan. 1, 2004, and May 31, 2020. Data for the number of daily deaths from COVID-19 were downloaded from the freely available COVID-19 Data Repository maintained by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

Consistent with prior years, searches for insomnia in 2020 occurred most frequently during typical sleeping hours between midnight and 5 a.m., peaking around 3 a.m.

"This is the prime time for sleeping, so all these people were awake and probably wondering why they couldn't sleep," said Zitting.

Due to concern about the potential long-term impact of the pandemic on sleep quality, Zitting said that she plans to continue tracking searches for insomnia.

"While acute insomnia, typically triggered by stress or a traumatic event, will often go away on its own, I am worried that the longer this pandemic drags on, the greater the number of people who go on to develop chronic insomnia," she said. "And unlike acute insomnia, [chronic insomnia](#) can be difficult to

treat."

In a new clinical practice guideline, the American Academy of Sleep Medicine recommends that clinicians use [multi-component cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia](#) for the treatment of chronic [insomnia](#) disorder in adults. Another AASM clinical practice guideline indicates that several [medications can be considered for the treatment of chronic insomnia](#) in adults, mainly in patients who are unable to participate in CBT-I or still have symptoms despite treatment, or in select cases as a temporary adjunct to CBT-I.

**More information:** Kirsi-Marja Zitting et al, Google Trends reveal increases in internet searches for insomnia during the COVID-19 global pandemic, *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.5664/jcsm.8810](https://doi.org/10.5664/jcsm.8810)

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