

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

17. Sleeping Problems

About one in three people with cancer report sleeping difficulties (insomnia) at some point during their treatment. Perhaps this is not surprising in view of the fear and uncertainty that cancer creates. Most insomnia problems are to do with getting off to sleep or waking in the night, followed by difficulty falling to sleep again. Here are some common causes and what may be done about them:

How can I manage my sleep problem?

The simple guidelines below can really improve your sleep but they may take time. It can take a few weeks to develop a new sleep pattern. If you feel that you are making little progress or the problem is getting worse then speak to your GP or Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS).

Worrying about not getting enough sleep:

- People often worry that not getting enough sleep will damage them in some way. The reality is that not having as much sleep as you would like is not medically harmful to you. So, rather than trying so hard to get to sleep and becoming frustrated if you are unable to do so, why not use the time with the simpler aim of resting. Rest is very good for you and is best achieved by completely relaxing all the muscles in your body. The idea that we all need 7-8 hours sleep a night is not true. The amount of sleep we need ranges from 4 hours to 9 hours. Also the amount of sleep we need varies throughout our lives. As we know babies need a lot of sleep and many people over seventy will require less than 6 hours sleep. Not only does the need for sleep vary from person to person and according to our age. It also varies depending on how active we are and what treatment we are receiving.

Treatment:

- Some medications, such as steroids, can cause people to feel restless. On the other hand, many cancer treatments cause fatigue (physical exhaustion) and, not surprisingly, people often respond to their tiredness by having a nap during the day. Napping during the day can help and give a boost to energy levels. It may help to keep the nap to a set length of time to avoid it affecting the natural rhythm of sleep at night. However, this can lead to a disruption of the normal sleep-wake cycle. Try to cut down, or even eliminate, any naps during the day and stick to a regular routine of only sleeping at night. To begin with you might need to go to bed slightly earlier than normal but it's better to move to normal sleeping hours as soon as possible. The need to go to the toilet more in the night occurs more in later life or if cancer treatments have an effect on the bladder.

The sleeping environment:

- Ensure that your bedclothes are comfortable and suitable for the temperature of the room. Ensure that there is fresh air coming into the room to prevent it from becoming too stuffy or too hot. It is probably better that the room is a little too cool than too warm. Ensure that the bedroom is dark and quiet. Block out any irritating noises or wear earplugs. Try to avoid doing anything in bed other than sleep. Over time you need to strengthen the link your brain makes between lying in bed and sleeping. So avoid eating, watching TV or listening to the radio for long periods of time while you are in your bedroom.

Pre-sleep routine

- Use the hour before bedtime to unwind and prepare for sleep by having a relaxing routine. Have a bath, turn off the television and listen to soft music or a relaxation CD.

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If you simply can't sleep:

- Only if you have been awake for over half an hour should you think about getting up and walking into another room. If possible sit in a chair and relax or possibly read. Keep the lights low to encourage you to feel sleepy again. Try a relaxing herbal tea (chamomile/night-time) and avoid any stimulation such as TV or radio. When you feel sleepy again quietly return to bed and notice the weight of your body sinking into the bed, remembering to focus on resting and allowing sleep to come of its own accord.

Exercise:

- If you are capable of it, even mild exercise during the day can often help alleviate sleep problems. Of course you should only take exercise when you are ready for it so, if you are unsure, it is important to take advice about when this is.

Diet:

- Try to avoid drinking any stimulants such as tea, coffee, cocoa, colas or chocolate any later than 4 to 6 hours before bed. Too much alcohol can also cause insomnia although a 'night cap' before bedtime can help you feel sleepy and it is fine to do this if helpful. Avoid very spicy or sugary food before bed, and try not to go to bed either very full or hungry since both can disturb sleep, though a small bedtime snack or milky drink can sometimes help you to feel sleepier. And remember that smoking is a stimulant and should be avoided around bedtime.

Nightmares:

- Nightmares are often related to illness and/or medication and often happen at times of stress. It is important to recognise that the nightmare cannot cause any direct harm, though it may result in disturbed sleep. One suggestion to try if you have a nightmare is to "neutralise" the nightmare before going back to sleep. Lie back and visualise a positive, peaceful and happy alternative to the nightmare. Even if you can't think of a specific alternative to the dream, be sure to conjure up pleasant scenes and emotions.

Pain:

- Pain can cause people to stay awake and could be the result of surgery or it may be the cancer causing the pain. Most pain can be successfully treated.

Worry and anxiety:

- Cancer creates fear and uncertainty, and exposes people to many new experiences. At night, with nothing else to distract us, we can feel alone with our thoughts and our minds can turn worries into catastrophes. So instead of doing your worrying at night, plan for a specific time in the day (perhaps the early evening) when you will go through each of your worries, preferably with someone who will listen and help you make sense of them. It can help to write your worries down because this gets them out of you and often makes them feel more controllable. Rather than going to sleep worrying about things over which you may have little control, why not try reading a book – something fun and imaginative – and fall asleep thinking about that. If you wake during the night try to remember the story - what was happening when you put down the book to turn off the light? A warm bath just before bedtime can also help people physically relax or you could think about practising relaxation exercises. Some people also find that sprinkling a few drops of lavender oil on their pillow helps them relax and sleep better.

Sadness and depression:

- The many months of stress following a diagnosis and during treatment can lead people to feel emotionally exhausted and depressed. People who have become depressed often suffer with difficulty sleeping.

10 Top Tips from patients:

- ◇ Epsom salts bath 500ml in hot bath introduce cold water
- ◇ Don't lie in in the morning
- ◇ Go to bed earlier
- ◇ Yoga/Mindfulness Classes/Meditation
- ◇ Eat as early as practical and don't over indulge
- ◇ Try to write your worries down – leave a pen and paper by your bed
- ◇ 30 minutes 'downtime'- listen to audio book/music
- ◇ Herbal tea drinks as low in caffeine
- ◇ Night sweats—try using a cooling pillow such as 'Chillows' or a bamboo pillow
- ◇ Put lavender oil on cotton wool under pillow

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Aids to sleep

- Try reducing caffeinated drinks after about 6pm
- Not too much liquid in the evening and limit alcohol
- Try relaxing herbal teas, such as chamomile or relaxing mixes
- Eat as early as practical
- Put lavender oil on cotton wool under your pillow
- Remember the body is resting even when you are not asleep
- Use a relaxation CD or similar
- 30 minutes 'downtime' before bed i.e. relaxing bath, no TV, quiet music etc.
- Bring your awareness to your breathing

Managing Anxiety

Worry time

Take time out regularly to address the main issues that are concerning you (10-15 mins preferably not late in the evening)

In this time consider:

Writing lists

- **Red:** Things I can do nothing about
- **Orange:** Things that I will be able to do something about at some point
- **Green:** Things I can do something about now, And do them!

- **Journaling-** writing down your thoughts, feelings and concerns

Imagine your life like a chest of drawers.

- Put the things we do to survive, the stuff of everyday life in the bottom drawer (eating, drinking, sleeping, shopping etc.)
- Put your concerns, worries and fears in the top drawer. Name these things and put each concern into a box in the drawer. By naming them and separating them out it may help contain them and not feel so overwhelmed.
- Fill the second drawer with your resources, what makes you 'YOU'. What makes you smile? What calms you? When we are stressed we often stop doing the things that support us. Try and remember to do the simple everyday things that you enjoy.

Becoming the master of your thoughts:

- When you have had your 'worry time' become the master of your thoughts and when they come into your mind, bring them to heel, tell them to 'STAY' they will get their time later or tomorrow- AND NOW you have other things to attend to!

Using breathing techniques

- For anxiety and sleep: breath out first of all, then breathe in for the count of 5 and out for the count of 7 (if that is too long or short just alter the count accordingly, 3-5, 7-9, breathe out for a little longer than your breathe in)
- For panic: focus on the outbreath, allow the in-breath to follow. Don't try and take a deep breath, just let it be as it is and bring your attention to your feet, feeling the ground beneath your feet and focusing on each part of the foot in turn.

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17. Sleeping Problems - Resources/Information

Local Resources:

Advice	GP, oncology doctor, physiotherapist or specialist nurse
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National Resources:

Sleep Matters www.medicaladvisoryservice.org.uk Call 0208 994 9874	Provides telephone advice and resources concerning sleeping problems
The Sleep Council www.sleepcouncil.org.uk Helpline:0800 018 7923	Sleep Council is an impartial, advisory organisation that raises the awareness of the importance of a good night's sleep to health and wellbeing and provides helpful advice and tips on how to improve sleep quality and create the perfect sleep environment.
Moodjuice http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/SleepProblems.asp	Strategies that you could use to overcome your sleep problems
Sleepstation https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/sleepstation/	Sleepstation is a 6-week online course for people who struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep through the night. The course is tailored to your needs, using the information you provide, and gives you access to a team of sleep experts who will offer helpful advice and support throughout. FREE!
Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 — 7 days a week 8.00am—8.00pm	Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230
Macmillan on-line Community	Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!
Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support	Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday

Other Resources :

Article by Dr Peter Hardy	'Living after cancer'
Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems <i>Author:</i> Colin Espie <i>Published:</i> 2012	This manual is based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy principles. It teaches you how to ensure your bedroom encourages a good nights sleep; how to develop good pre bedtime routines; how to deal with a racing mind; and how to relax. It helps in establishing a new sleeping and waking pattern. It teaches us how to make effective use of sleeping pills and also helps in dealing with special problems including jet lag and sleepwalking.
Macmillan Booklets	Managing the symptoms of cancer— MAC11671
	Cancer and complimentary therapies— MAC11645
	How are you feeling? The emotional effects of cancer— MAC11593