

Managing Sleep

Problems falling asleep or staying asleep (also called insomnia) are common among people being treated for cancer. Sleep problems range from mild to extreme. Many things can cause sleep problems such as medications, stress, pain and worry.

If you do not sleep well, you may:

- Be tired during the day;
- Have low energy;
- Have trouble with memory, attention and focus.

Practicing good daily routines can help. If your problem gets worse or you need more help, please talk to your cancer care team.

Make these your daily routines:

- **Wake up at the same time each day:** This helps to set your circadian "inner clock". This clock determines your sleep and wake times. Over-sleeping after a night of disturbed sleep, or sleeping in on weekends, may cause your sleep problems to continue.
- **Turn on your light or open your curtains or blinds when you wake up:** Getting enough light is very important for your sleep-wake cycle. Light exposure can help reset your inner clock, making it easier to keep good sleep routines.
- **Create a buffer zone (a time to unwind before bed):** Sometimes your mind avoids worrisome thoughts during the day. They may re-appear when you are trying to fall or stay asleep. It may help to write your thoughts in a journal or put them in an imaginary container to hold them until you are able to deal with them later.

Set aside 60 to 90 minutes before bed to unwind and relax, problem solve, plan and make decisions. This can help quiet your mind. The aim is to prepare your body and mind for sleep.

For example, dim the lights and do calming activities such as reading, meditation, prayer, or crosswords, have a warm bath, listen to audio books or music, try relaxation or imagery techniques. Do not use backlit devices before bed, such as smartphones, tablets and e-readers.

- **Only go to bed when sleepy:** During cancer recovery, it can be hard to tell the difference between fatigue and boredom and sleepiness. You may spend more time in bed and try harder to sleep. Spending extra time awake in bed and thinking about sleeping **will not** help you fall asleep. In fact, these actions can make your sleep problems worse.

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- **Use your bedroom for sleep and sex only:** During recovery, you may want to use your bed for many activities but it is important to keep this space for sleep and sex only. Make other areas where you spend time during the day comfortable and relaxing.
- **If you are not asleep within 20 to 30 minutes, get out of bed and return when sleepy:** The mind becomes active after being in bed for 20 to 30 minutes. It is important to break the habit of trying harder to get to sleep and strengthen the connection between the bedroom and sleep. Get out of bed and return to your “buffer zone” activity (see above). Once you feel sleepy, go back to bed. You might want to keep slippers and a robe by your bed so that you can be warm when you leave bed.
- **Check your beliefs about sleep:** Many of us have beliefs about sleep that are untrue or unrealistic. For example, many people believe that it is not normal to wake up during the night. The truth is that it is normal to wake up one or two times, but not stay awake.

Take some time to think about your beliefs and expectations. Make sure that your beliefs line up with what is real for you and your situation.

- **Do not nap:** Napping during the day may get in the way of sleeping at night. This can be difficult. If you need to rest but it is not yet bedtime, go to a room other than your bedroom. Rather than sleeping, sit in a chair instead of using your bed.

Other suggestions:

- Try not to eat or drink caffeine, sugar, or alcohol right before bed. Do not use nicotine right before bed.
- Before bed, eat a light snack with a carbohydrate and protein. For example oatmeal with milk, banana and peanut butter on toast, or cheese and crackers.
- Try using earplugs and an eye mask if noise and light bother you during the night.
- Make sure you have good symptom control to handle pain and nausea. Talk to your doctor if you need help with this.
- If you are confined to bed, do mind activities such as games and puzzles. Move your body as much as you can during the day. You can try tensing and relaxing your muscles or stretching in bed.
- Keep a notepad and pen beside your bed to write down any concerns. This may help you from thinking about them during sleep or when falling asleep.

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Resources:

- BC Cancer Patient & Family Counselling Services. Call your local BC Cancer centre to make an appointment.
- Book: **60 Second Sleep Ease: Quick tips to a get a good night's rest**, by S.R. Currie and K.G. Wilson.
- **The Insomnia Workbook: A comprehensive guide to getting the sleep you need**, by S Silberman
- For help with practical and emotional issues related to coping with cancer, go to the BC Cancer Coping with Cancer webpage: bccancer.bc.ca/coping
- Kelty's Key is a free and confidential online cognitive behavioural therapy service. It provides support to help manage sleep problems. Go to Courses and chose "insomnia". www.keltyskey.com

Adapted in part from: Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology (2012), A Pan-Canadian Practice Guideline: Prevention, Screening, Assessment and Treatment of Sleep Disturbances in Adults with Cancer.