



# Strathclyde Centre for Sleep Health

## Helping people with cancer to sleep well

**Difficulty sleeping is common in people with cancer. Sleep often becomes disturbed around the time of cancer diagnosis, and treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and endocrine therapy can make sleep worse.**

**Poor sleep is a very normal response to a stressful life event like being diagnosed with cancer, and providing it doesn't last too long, is not something to be overly concerned about. However, if your difficulty sleeping becomes frequent, persistent, and interferes with your day-to-day life, it is important that you take steps to address it.**

**This leaflet provides some helpful information about how to sleep well during cancer treatment and beyond. It also provides information that you can use to start a conversation with your doctor or specialist nurse about your sleep.**

### **What is Insomnia?**

Trouble sleeping affects around 1 in 3 of us at any one time. Chronic difficulty sleeping, known as insomnia, affects approximately 10% of the general population and around 25% of people with cancer. The inability to initiate or maintain sleep can be very distressing at night, but also has consequences for the daytime. Therefore, insomnia is a 24-hour problem.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) defines insomnia as a combination of dissatisfaction with sleep and negative daytime consequences that occurs at least 3 nights per week for at least 3 months, despite adequate opportunity to sleep. This includes:

- Difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep, or waking too early and being unable to get back to sleep
- Dissatisfaction with your sleep during the night that leaves you feeling unrefreshed the following day
- Negative daytime impacts such as low mood, poor concentration, fatigue, sleepiness and impaired social or occupational functioning.

# Strathclyde Centre for Sleep Health

Helping people with cancer to sleep well

---

## Barriers to sleep

Many different factors can influence the quantity and quality of your sleep. Some are common, everyday factors that we all experience from time to time. Others are factors that are specific to people with cancer. Possible barriers to good sleep include:

- Bedroom that is too hot, cold or noisy
- Uncomfortable bed
- Strong light too close to bedtime
- Stimulants such as cigarettes and caffeine
- Lack of physical activity
- Medicines that make you feel alert, such as steroids
- Anxiety, worry and emotional distress
- Physical complaints such as pain, discomfort or feeling unwell
- Napping during the day
- Irregular sleep schedule
- Some cancer treatments

## Things you can do to improve your sleep

If you are experiencing a **short-term sleep problem**, you may find that sleep medication is helpful. However, it is important to remember that medication to help you sleep should not be taken for any longer than two weeks and may cause side effects the following day. It is important to discuss this with your doctor to check that sleep medication is appropriate for you.

If you are experiencing **longer-term sleep problems**, the best treatment is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT comprises both cognitive and behavioural techniques that help you get to sleep more quickly and stay asleep during the night. CBT is recommended by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence for persistent difficulty with sleep.

## Sleep tips based on CBT techniques

### 1. Maintain a stable sleep pattern and a regular bedtime routine

Going to bed and getting up at the same time each day, 7 days a week, will help you keep your sleep in a stable pattern. Establishing a bedtime routine that you use each night will help your body recognise when it is time for bed. Small cues such as having a warm, milky drink, brushing your teeth, or reading a relaxing book can let your brain know that it's time to sleep.

### 2. Resist the temptation to nap during the day

Generally, sleeping during the day is inconsistent with our internal biological clock. When we nap during the day, it lowers the sleep pressure we feel in the evening. It is this sleep pressure that helps us feel sleepy at bedtime, so napping can delay feelings of sleepiness and make it harder to nod off.

### 3. Make sure you are physically active

Physical activity during the day promotes better quality sleep at night. Engaging in some form of aerobic exercise 3 times a week helps improve sleep quality, reduce time taken to fall asleep and reduce the number of awakenings during the night. However, make sure you don't exercise too late in the day as that may delay sleep onset. Aerobic exercise may feel too difficult if you have recently had treatment and are struggling with low energy levels or side effects. However, even regular short walks can help to build stamina and improve the quality of your sleep.

### 4. Reduce light at bedtime

Light makes it harder to fall asleep and affects the body's internal clock. The hormone that promotes sleep (called melatonin) is released in response to darkness, so lying down in a dark bedroom can stimulate its production and help you to fall sleep.

# Strathclyde Centre for Sleep Health

Helping people with cancer to sleep well

---

## 5. Avoid stimulants

Stimulants such as nicotine and caffeinated drinks, particularly when consumed late in the day, affect the time taken to fall asleep and sleep quality. Even good sleepers should limit the amount of caffeine that they ingest. Caffeine is present in tea, coffee, chocolate and fizzy drinks, but can also be a hidden substance in some products. It is important to check labels before taking anything that you are unfamiliar with (especially medication).

## 6. Limit your alcohol intake in the evening

While alcohol may help you to fall asleep more quickly, your sleep will be much lighter and of poorer quality. This is because alcohol alters the composition of sleep stages, resulting in much more time spent in lighter, non-restorative stages of sleep.

## 7. Quieten your mind

Many people with cancer report being 'unable to turn their mind off' at night. They lie awake going over things that they are worried about, and without the distractions of daytime, this can become overwhelming.

It may help to keep a worry journal. If you wake up at night and begin worrying, write your worries down. There is probably nothing you can do about them in the middle of the night anyway, but if you note them down, you can then work through them the next day with a relative, friend, or your doctor or nurse.

Many people find that their fears and worries are reduced simply by telling someone else about them. This type of 'offloading' can be a relief and you may find that you sleep better afterwards. Try talking to a close friend or family member, or you might prefer to talk to someone outside your immediate circle.

## 8. Relaxation

Simple breathing and relaxation exercises may be very useful in reducing the stress that leads to poor sleep. They can also reduce muscle tension. Many people with cancer find that these simple methods relax them and give them a sense of calm and control. Find a relaxation exercise that works for you and practice during the day to make sure you are comfortable with the technique. You will find many great options on CD, videos on YouTube or podcasts.

### Contact:

Strathclyde Centre for Sleep Health,  
Graham Hills Building,  
40 George Street,  
Glasgow

Email:  
[centreforsleephealth@strath.ac.uk](mailto:centreforsleephealth@strath.ac.uk)