

Getting a good night's sleep after cancer treatment

Having trouble sleeping is common after cancer treatments. Trouble sleeping may be due to anxiety, fatigue, medication or a change in your routine. The information in this handout is to help you get your sleep back on track. The suggestions are only a guideline.



Please discuss your sleep difficulties with your nurse or doctor.

Getting your sleep back on track

Take less caffeine in your diet. Caffeine is a stimulant and can keep you awake. Avoid caffeine up to 12 hours before bedtime. Caffeine is found in:

- coffee, teas, including some herbal
- colas, dark pop
- chocolate
- some over-the-counter medications

Reduce or stop smoking. The nicotine in cigarettes is a stimulant and can keep you awake.

Do not drink alcohol 4 to 6 hours before bed. Drinking alcohol will make you feel drowsy at first. However, as the alcohol wears off, there is a withdrawal effect that can disrupt sleep and wake you up.

Eat a healthy diet: fruits, vegetables, multigrains and lean protein.

- Eat at regular times.
- If you are hungry before bed, have a light, healthy snack such as a piece of fruit, toast or a bowl of cereal.
- Avoid spicy, heavy or sugary foods 4 to 6 hours before bedtime.

Exercise, become more active:

- Do some exercise everyday to improve your sense of well being.
- If your health limits your ability to exercise, check with your doctor/nurse about what exercise is recommended. Walking is usually a safe exercise.

Cut out naps. During recovery from cancer treatments taking afternoon naps may seem to be a good thing to combat fatigue. However, napping may “rob” your nighttime sleep.

Instead:

- Consider an afternoon rest without sleeping such as sitting in a comfortable chair with your feet up.
- Limit rest breaks to 30 to 45 minutes.
- It is okay to nap, if you have safety concerns such as driving or operating machinery.
- Use an alarm clock if you are concerned about oversleeping.

Create a routine at bedtime:

- **Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.** Our bodies like routine! Get up at the same time each morning, no matter how much or how little sleep you get.
 - **Do a relaxing activity before going to bed** such as taking a warm bath, listening to quiet music, reading a book or drinking warm milk. The secret is to find something that works for you.
 - **Develop a daily relaxation practice** such as meditating, stretching or doing progressive muscle relaxation.
 - **Turn the TV off** 1 hour before bed.
 - **Set your alarm** and place a cover over the clock. It is hard to relax if you are watching the clock.
 - **Try a light snack** before bed.
 - **Don't take your worries to bed.** You may find it helpful to have a worry period in the late afternoon or early evening. This may be the time to review your “to do” list and organize yourself for the next day.
-

Create an environment to help you sleep:

- Avoid using your bed for activities other than sleep and sex. Do not use your iPad/laptop in bed. Your bed is not the office!
- Have a comfortable bed with a pillow that is right for you.
- Dress or undress for comfort.
- Reduce noise and light as much as possible. However, “white noise” such as a fan or air conditioning might help you to fall asleep.
- Make sure your bedroom is a comfortable temperature (a cool, not cold room may help), and has enough humidity and airflow.

If you are still awake after 30 minutes: get up and go to another room. Do something relaxing or even boring and quiet your mind. Keep the lighting dim.

- Read a book.
- Practice slow abdominal breathing.
- Listen to calming music.
- Avoid stimulating activities such as smoking, watching TV, housework.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine

Medications and sleep aids for short term use

Melatonin has been shown to be helpful only for individuals who have a delayed sleep phase. A delayed sleep phase is when your internal sleep clock is not on track. This means you go to bed much later than most people such as 3:00 am.

Valarian and lavender are both promoted as sleep aids. Both have side effects and can interact with other medications.

We recommend that you discuss any medications and sleep aids with your doctor before taking them.

Now what?

If you have tried everything suggested in the handout but you are still not sleeping well, please see your family doctor. Some people with ongoing sleep problems, may have a sleep disorder such as:

- insomnia
- restless leg syndrome
- periodic limb movement
- sleep apnea

Sleep apnea



Sleep apnea is when you stop breathing for periods of time while sleeping. This is a serious medical problem. If you have any 2 of these 4 signs, see your family doctor:

- high blood pressure
- snoring
- fatigued, sleepy during the day
- anyone observed you not breathing at night

Resources

National Sleep Foundation website: <http://www.sleepfoundation.org/>

Quiet Your Mind and Get To Sleep, by C. Carney & R. Manber

You may find resources for progressive muscle relaxation www.anxietybc.com in search box “progressive muscle relaxation”.



Juravinski Cancer Centre
699 Concession Street
Hamilton, Ontario L8V 5C2
905-387-9495

PD 8386 – 02/2014
dpc/pted/CancerTreatGoodNightSleep-th.doc
dt/February 12, 2014