



Sleep difficulties and cancer

Following a diagnosis of cancer, quality sleep can help you manage with day to day life. This leaflet gives information on why sleep is important and suggests some techniques to help you sleep.

Sleeping and cancer

Having difficulty sleeping is normal for someone who has a cancer diagnosis or who is going through cancer treatment. There are many things you can do in order to try and improve the quality of your sleep. Insomnia (sleep difficulties) include:

- Finding it difficult to fall asleep.
- Waking up throughout the night.
- Waking very early and not being able to go back to sleep.
- Difficult sleeping despite the right conditions (e.g. dark room, comfy bed and bedding).
- Everyday activities being affected due to lack of sleep, e.g. fatigue, poor concentration, low mood.



If you don't sleep for one night, it will likely only affect you the following day. However, if it continues and you are finding it too difficult to sleep for a longer period of time, then this can have an effect on your overall day to day function, and ability to manage certain daily tasks.

Factors that can affect quality sleep:

- Not having a regular sleep routine.
- Uncomfortable environment – mattress and pillows / room too hot or cold.
- Consuming too much caffeine.
- Little to no exercise.
- Stress, worry and anxiety.
- Different sleep pattern to your partner.
- Pain / discomfort.
- Medications.

Getting enough sleep is very important if you have a cancer diagnosis. Lack of sleep can affect how you manage daily activities and cause difficulties with concentration and focus. Getting enough sleep can boost your mental wellbeing, which is important when dealing with the added worries and anxiety of your diagnosis.

Tips to improve your sleep:

- Get into a routine – your body will learn to know when it is time to go to sleep.
- Aim for 7-8 hours of sleep – try not to oversleep.
- Exercise – moderate and regular activity can relieve any tension, but not too soon before bed as that may keep you awake.
- Set a time to go to bed and wake up – choose times you're likely to feel tired.
- Keep your bedroom just for sleeping – try not to spend time in there during the day.
- Maintain a comfortable temperature in your bedroom – avoid it being too hot or cold.
- Avoid screen time before bed – try not to watch TV or use your phone or tablet in bed.
- Limit alcohol intake before going to bed – alcohol may help you sleep instantly but your sleep is likely to be disrupted during the night.
- Reduce caffeine towards the end of day – caffeine can affect your brain and body and can prevent deeper sleep.
- Try to limit napping during the day.
- Relax before going to bed – try breathing exercises, yoga stretches, relaxation Apps, or a warm bath. Using ear plugs or an eye mask may also help in busier environments.

If you are really finding it difficult to get to sleep, get up out of bed and do something to relax or take your mind off not being able to sleep. Some people find listening to soothing stories or music help them relax and fall asleep.

Worries and anxieties

Having a diagnosis of cancer will naturally cause feelings of anxiety and worry, which in turn can affect sleep. There is a variety of information and techniques to help cope with stress and anxiety. Writing down what is worrying you can be a good way to get them off your chest, especially at night when you can't necessarily do anything about them. Keep a pen and paper next to your bed – you can work through the concerns the next day.

Talking to a family member, partner or friend can also be useful to express worries that occur during the night. Using online chat rooms and communities can also be useful to see what others are experiencing and what they are doing to manage it.

If sleep is becoming considerably difficult, then speak to your GP or the ward doctor.

Please also ask to speak with the therapists on Adelaide Ward for further information and support on coping with the side effects of a cancer diagnosis.

Useful websites

www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/10-tips-to-beat-insomnia/

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/trouble-sleeping

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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