

Problems with Sleep

onTrac@PeterMac
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CANCER

Sleep: What is it?

Sleep is a period of rest and recuperation for the body, and a much needed 'downtime' for the brain. The amount of sleep people need depends on their age, lifestyle, diet, personality, environment and health. Generally, we need less sleep as we age and it is recommended that adolescents and young adults get between 8 to 10 hours a night.

Having healthy uninterrupted sleep is a basic human need. It is as important as eating and breathing. Without rest your body doesn't know how to function properly and the effects can impact both your emotional and physical well being.

Sleep is regulated by an internal chemical 'clock' which is tuned by the day-night cycles. When the sun sets, your brain starts to release 'sleepy' chemicals, until eventually you feel the need to go to bed for the night. In the morning, exposure to daylight prompts your brain to release 'awake' chemicals. Sometimes the stress you experience in your daily life can impact upon your sleep and your internal clock can get mixed up.

What if I can't sleep?

One of the more common sleep problems is insomnia. The symptoms of insomnia are difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep. You might go to bed as usual, but you find you are lying there thinking of lots of things, and just not getting to sleep. Or you could be waking up really early in the morning and not be able to get back to sleep. Some people get insomnia when they are really worried about something, or they are depressed. For some people it is a pattern which their body has got into.

Not being able to sleep can be really distressing. When you have insomnia you can still feel tired when you get up and it can be difficult to cope with the day ahead of you. If you feel like you haven't been able to rest properly, your body and mind can be affected. Some people may start feeling irritable or moody, or find it hard to concentrate during the day. Some people don't feel like doing much when they haven't had enough sleep and this can begin to impact upon day to day life.

What could I do to help myself if I am having problems with my sleep?

To get a healthy night sleep there are some things you can try.

DO

- Get in to the pattern of going to bed around the same time and getting up at about the same time each morning, even on the weekend!
- Try and exercise during the day so you feel physically tired at night. Don't overdo it but try some regular swimming or walking. Late evening exercise can keep you awake, so try to make the exercise in the afternoon or early evening.
- If you are lying there and not getting to sleep, try a relaxation exercise.
- Have a warm bath
- If you can't get to sleep after 20 mins, get up and move to the lounge room. Do something relaxing (e.g. read a magazine/book, but don't drink coffee or tea!) until you feel sleepy again then go back to bed.
- Have a hot milk drink. Hot milk has natural sedative compounds in it.
- Try visualisations including something peaceful or boring.
- Quit smoking – nicotine can contribute to sleep loss.
- Make sure your bed and bedroom are comfortable – not too hot, not too cold, not too noisy
- Make sure your bed is properly supportive – not too firm, not too soft.
- Take some time to relax properly before going to bed
- If something is troubling you and there is nothing you can do about it right away, try writing it down before going to bed and then tell yourself you will deal with it tomorrow
- Have a bedtime routine. Let your body know you are getting ready for sleep.

DON'T

- Read or work in bed during the day
- Watch TV in bed
- Sleep during the day. If you are very tired, make it a short nap (about 45 minutes), not a long sleep
- Exercise strenuously in the evening
- Eat heavily or drink caffeinated beverages in the late afternoon or at night.

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What could I do to help myself if I am having problems with my sleep? (cont.)

- Drink a lot of alcohol. It may help you fall asleep, but you will almost certainly wake up during the night.
- Go without sleep for a long time – keep a regular pattern of going to bed and getting up at the same time every day whether you are tired or not
- Eat or drink a lot late at night. Try to have your evening meal early rather than late.
- Lie there worrying. Get up and do something you find relaxing. Read, watch television or listen to quiet music. After a while you should feel tired enough to go to bed again.

Where could I go for extra help?

- Your treating institution – talk to your oncologist, nurse or social worker.
- onTrac@PeterMac
- Talk to your GP
- www.sleepfoundation.org
- www.bettersleep.org

Sources

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