
Coping with sleep difficulties

People affected by cancer can often have sleep difficulties, including:

- Finding it hard to fall asleep
- Finding it hard to stay asleep
- Waking up early
- Oversleeping.

What we are thinking and feeling can affect our sleep. Worry and anxiety can make it hard to sleep in the first place, and then a lack of sleep can become something else to worry about. People low in mood often have difficulty falling or staying asleep; or they can feel really sleepy during the day and feel the need to sleep much longer than usual. Sleep problems can make low mood worse, building a vicious cycle between low mood and sleep.

Different people need different amounts of sleep. Try to work out how much (and what quality) sleep is enough for you. Some people only need a few hours sleep each night to feel rested and alert during the day. Other people do not sleep much at night but nap during the day and find that this is refreshing enough for them. Furthermore, it is normal to wake up during the night when we end sleep cycles (which tend to last about 90 minutes). As we get older we tend to wake up more during the night.

If sleep difficulties are bothering you or making you feel tired during the day, you can try some of the strategies below. If your sleep difficulties are affecting your ability to do important things, it could be helpful to speak with your specialist nurse or doctor.

Cancer treatment and sleep

- Sleeping difficulties can be a common side effect of various cancer treatments. For example, radiotherapy and immunotherapy can make you feel very tired and mean that you need to sleep during the day, which can make it hard to sleep at night.
- People whose chemotherapy involves steroids can find that they feel more wired or awake than usual.
- After surgery, the pain and discomfort caused by this can understandably disrupt sleep for a while.
- If your sleeping difficulties seem to be caused by your treatment, try not to worry about this too much as it may be something you need to accept for a while before trying to get your sleep routine back on track after treatment.

Try to do a manageable level of physical activity in the day

- Physical activity may be hard for you because of your cancer and its treatment. However, it can be helpful to try to find a small and manageable level of physical activity that you could try to do each day. This can help you feel more tired at night and help you build your strength.
- This might be some stretches, a short walk outside, or some gentle gardening.
- Try to do physical activities in the daytime as physical activity in the few hours before bed can keep you awake.



Use your bedroom for sleep

- Try to help your mind and body associate your bed with sleep by only using it for sleeping and sex.
- Doing other activities in your bedroom (eg eating, watching TV) can weaken the idea that the bedroom is for sleep, so try to do them in other rooms if possible.
- If this is not possible, you can still try to strengthen the relationship between your bed and sleep by trying to sit in a different part of your bedroom when doing other activities.
- You could also establish a sleep routine (eg using essential oils or putting on relaxing music before bed) to help bedtime seem different from the other in your bedroom.

Limit alcohol, caffeine and nicotine before bedtime

- Alcohol, caffeine and nicotine are all substances that can disrupt sleep.
- Although alcohol might help you to fall asleep, it can disrupt the quality of sleep so you are less likely to feel well-rested in the morning.
- Caffeine and nicotine are both stimulants so try to avoid having them too close to your bedtime to reduce the risk of your sleep being disrupted. Different people have different cut-off points in terms of how late they can have these stimulants without it affecting their sleep, so try to work out what your cut-off point might be.
- If you find yourself craving a hot drink in the evening, perhaps try some caffeine-free or low-caffeine alternatives (eg decaffeinated tea or warm milk).

Avoid using a computer or watching TV before bed

- Spending time on a computer or watching TV before bed can be very stimulating and make it hard for your brain and body to wind down, so it can be helpful to avoid doing these things before you go to bed.

- Try to think of some other things you might be able to do instead, such as reading, listening to relaxing music or taking a bath.

Establish a sleep routine

- Try to train your body by developing a routine of going to bed and waking up at the same time each day. If you work, try to wake up at the same time on days off too to maintain this regular rhythm.



- It will not always be possible to do this, so it is ok to have some change. One extra hour of sleep can contribute to a sense of jet-lag.
- It can also be helpful to establish a routine of doing the same things in the same order before bed (eg turn off lights, go to bathroom to clean teeth, go to bed).

Try listening to audios that can help to bring a sense of relaxation before getting into bed

- There are various free audios that you could use to try to bring a sense of relaxation, such as ones focused on progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness 'body scans' and visualisation exercises.
- There are apps you can download for these (eg 'Calm' and 'Headspace'), but you can also access these on other websites such as YouTube.
- Here are two examples:
 - Progressive muscle relaxation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GURt2pvdAg>

- Mindfulness body scan
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyKhfUdOEGs>



Create a relaxing space

- Think about ways in which you could make your bedroom a relaxing space.
- Try to make it as quiet, dark and comfortable as possible. Light has a big effect on sleep because our body's sleep clock is regulated by light exposure so making sure it is dark in your bedroom can be a great way of letting your body know that it is time to sleep. If there is a lot of light in your room, you could try to wear an eye mask or find curtains that might be better at blocking out the light.
- Earplugs can also be helpful if there are disruptive sounds at night.
- Temperature can make a difference to the quality of your sleep too. Try to keep your room relatively cool, but not cold, in order to help you settle into sleep – ideally at a temperature of between 18C and 24C (adjust this depending on your preferences).
- Try to focus on the comfort of lying in bed, supported by the pillows and mattress, rather than the struggle to manage thoughts about not being able to get to sleep.

Get out of bed for a short period of time when you can't sleep

- If you've been lying in bed for around 20 minutes (or 20 minutes longer than usual) and haven't fallen asleep, get out of bed.

- This can stop some of the worrying and frustration about not sleeping which will make getting to sleep even harder.
- Find something relaxing (or boring) to do until you start to feel sleepy again. Try not to do anything too stimulating or involving any bright lights, as this could make you feel more awake.
- This can help you to keep the association with your bed and sleep and can help you to return to a more relaxed state.

Medication to help you sleep

- There may be times when you need to take medication to help you sleep.
- There are several herbal remedies that you can buy from any pharmacy but please be aware that these should only ever be taken as recommended and that tolerance can build up if taken regularly or for a long time.
- It is important you speak with either your GP, Clinical Nurse Specialist or Oncology team at The Royal Marsden before taking any herbal supplement, as some may interact with other medications you are already prescribed, or treatments you are receiving for your cancer.
- There are also medications that can aid sleep which require a prescription (for example, benzodiazepines eg diazepam and lorazepam, or non-benzodiazepines eg zopiclone).
- As with herbal remedies, these are generally prescribed for short-term use. Using more medication than prescribed or for longer than is necessary can result in increased tolerance (so they become less effective) and dependency (you may find you experience withdrawal symptoms such as restlessness and anxiety if you suddenly stop taking it).

If you need any specialist and personalised advice about your cancer treatment and appointments, please contact The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline. This hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 020 8915 6899.

Below are some links to websites with helpful information about sleep, and how you might be able to improve it:

Maggies

'Sleep and cancer'

<https://www.maggies.org/cancer-support/managing-symptoms-and-side-effects/sleep-and-cancer/>

Macmillan

Difficulty sleeping

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/trouble-sleeping>

NHS

'Trouble sleeping'

<https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues/sleep/>

The Royal Marsden

Coping with anxiety and worry

[LINK TBC](#)

The Royal Marsden's Adult Psychological Support Service offers short-term, cancer-specific psychological support. This includes psycho-sexual therapy and couples counselling. You can either self-refer or ask somebody in your Royal Marsden healthcare team to refer you. We can provide psychological support to people up to two years following their active cancer treatment.

For more information, visit this website <https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/your-care/adult-support-services/adult-psychological-support-service>.

**Alternatively, contact us directly on
020 7808 2777 (Chelsea) or
020 8661 3006 (Sutton).**

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This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

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