

# Self-help for sleep problems (insomnia)

Cancer patients often have concerns about falling asleep, staying asleep and waking up feeling unrefreshed, sometimes these types of problems are called insomnia. Problems can range in severity and can be due to stress or anxiety or can happen despite the circumstances. Lack of sleep may result in daytime fatigue, low energy and trouble with memory, attention and focus. It is important to practice good daily routines which can help. If your problems get worse, please talk to your doctor or nurse about other options.

## Make these your daily routines:

- **Wake up at the same time each day:** Routines can impact your sleep. Over-sleeping after a night of disturbed sleep, or sleeping-in on weekends, will likely ensure sleep problems carry on.
- **Turn on your light or open your curtains/ blinds when you wake up** Getting enough natural or man-made light is vital to restore your sleep-wake cycle that can become disturbed while in hospital or healing at home. Light exposure can help “reset” your inner clock, making it easier to keep good sleep routines.
- **Create a “buffer zone” (a time to unwind before bed):** Sometimes your mind may avoid worrisome thoughts during the day but they may re-appear when you do not want them, such as when you are trying to fall or stay asleep. It may be helpful to write your thoughts down in a journal or put them in an imaginary container to hold them until you are able to deal with them later.

Set aside 60 to 90 minutes before bed to unwind and relax, problem solve, plan and make decisions, to avoid going over and over the same things in your mind. The aim is to prepare your body and mind for sleep.

e.g., dim the lighting and take part in pleasant activities such as reading, meditation, prayer, crosswords, warm bath, magazines, audio books, music, relaxation or imagery. Do not use backlit devices before bed.

- **Only go to bed when sleepy:** During cancer recovery, it can be hard to tell the difference between fatigue and boredom and sleepiness. You may start spending more time in bed and try harder to sleep. Spending extra time awake in bed and thinking about sleeping **does not** add to the chances of falling asleep. In fact, these actions can actually worsen sleeping problems.
- **Use your bedroom for sleep and sex only:** During recovery, your bed may be used for a lot of activities other than sleep and sex. It is important to keep the bedroom and bed a place where you feel sleepy and fall asleep easily. Make other areas where you spend time during the day as cozy as your bed.
- **If you are not asleep within 20 to 30 minutes, get out of bed and return when sleepy:** The mind becomes active after being in bed for 20 to 30 minutes so it is important to break the habit of trying harder to get to sleep and strengthen the connection between the bedroom and sleep. Get out of bed and return to your “buffer zone” activity. Once you feel sleepy, return to bed. You might want to keep slippers and robe by your bed so that you can easily get warm when you leave bed.
- **Make sure your beliefs about sleep are real and true:** Often beliefs about sleep are untrue or unrealistic at best. Beliefs such as: needing 8 hours of sleep (when, in fact, normal sleep needs range

from 6 to 8 hours) or; sleep needs change with age (when often sleep quality only gets lighter) or; waking up during the night (when it is normal to wake up 1 to 2 times, but not to stay awake). Take some time to think about your beliefs and what you and others expect, and then make sure that your beliefs line up with what is real for you and your situation.

- **Do not nap:** Napping during the day may get in the way with sleeping at night.

### **Other suggestions:**

- If resting (rather than sleeping), go to some other room other than the bedroom or move to a chair instead of using the bed
- Avoid caffeine, sugar, nicotine and alcohol right before bed
- Eat a light snack with a carbohydrate and protein such as oatmeal with milk, banana and peanut butter on toast, or cheese and crackers
- Lessen noise and disruptions during the night. Try using earplugs and an eye mask
- Make sure you have good symptom control to handle pain and nausea. Talk to your doctor if needed
- If you are confined to bed, do mind activities such as games and puzzles and move your body (flex your muscles and so on) as much as fitting throughout the day
- Keep a notepad and pen on hand at the bedside to write down any pressing concerns that may cause over-thinking and planning.

### **Resources:**

- Patient & Family Counselling Services – counselling services are on hand at your cancer centre, call and make an appointment.
- Cancer Chat Canada – professionally facilitated online support groups are available, go to <https://cancerchat.desouzainstitute.com/>
- Currie, S.R. & Wilson, K.G (2002): 60 Second Sleep Ease: Quick tips to a get a good night's rest: New Horizon Press: New Jersey.
- Silberman, S. (2009). The Insomnia Workbook: A comprehensive guide to getting the sleep you need. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications
- Apps: iPhone and iPad apps can help track your sleep and provide music selections. Search the internet (sleeping aid apps) you may need to pay a fee to download an app.
- For help with practical and emotional issues related to coping with cancer, go to the BC Cancer website and search Coping with Cancer.
- Kelty's Key is a free and confidential online cognitive behavioral therapy service that can provide support to help manage sleep problems. Go to Courses and chose "insomnia". <https://www.keltyskey.com/>

Adapted in part from: Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology (2012), [A Pan-Canadian Practice Guideline: Prevention, Screening, Assessment and Treatment of Sleep Disturbances in Adults with Cancer.](#)