



Sleep and Cancer

Sleep problems can be common in people being treated for cancer. Symptoms of cancer and side effects of cancer treatment can make it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep. Emotional problems, such as depression and anxiety, which can also be linked to cancer can also lead to poor sleep.

“Sleep hygiene” is a term used to describe habits that promote good sleep on a regular basis. Research suggests that following certain behaviors can help people improve the amount and quality of sleep. While medication can also be a part of treating sleep problems, having good sleep habits builds a lasting foundation for more restful sleep.

Helpful Tips for Better Sleep

1. Wake up at the same time every day, give or take 20 minutes. Try to stick to it whether you have had a good or poor night's sleep.

2. Go to bed when you are sleepy. Only try to fall asleep when you feel sleepy. Lying awake in bed for more than 10 to 15 minutes can make it harder for you to fall asleep.

3. Get up when you cannot sleep. If you can't fall asleep, get up and do something relaxing in another room until you are sleepy enough to fall asleep quickly. If you still cannot get to sleep, get up again.

4. Limit naps. Cutting back or cutting out napping can help your body and mind be tired and ready for sleep at bedtime. If you cannot make it through the day without a nap, keep them to 30 minutes and only before 3 p.m.

5. Use your bed just for sleep. Keep your bed a sleep-only zone. Do not use your bed for watching TV, paying bills, working, or reading. Use your bed for just sleeping. Sex is an exception.

6. Have a bedtime ritual. Regular bedtime rituals become strong sleep cues that help your body prepare for sleep. Rituals can include brushing your teeth, putting on your pajamas, turning off digital devices, or reading.



7. Make your environment as comfortable as possible.

Try to have comfortable bedding, limit bright lights and loud sounds, and keep the temperature on the cool side. The best room temperature for adult sleep is 60 to 67 degrees. Turning your clock (or phone) around can be a helpful practice to prevent “clock watching.”

8. Manage your anxiety. Find time during the day to address any worries. Sometimes it can help to write down a list of concerns or brainstorm ways to find solutions to problems. Do this at least 1 hour before bed. Once you get in bed, if worrying thoughts come up, try to instead focus on your breathing, listen to relaxing music, or think of nice things—things you are grateful for, a good part of your day, a pleasant memory.

9. Don't try too hard—just let the sleep unfold and be patient! It takes time to return to a more normal sleep pattern. These suggestions can help.

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Other Helpful Practices

Be physically active. But avoid hard workouts at least 4 hours before bedtime. Regular physical activity can help you sleep better, but the timing of your workout is important. For a more restful sleep, keep heavy workouts earlier in the day and no later than early evening.

Unplug from electronics. Avoid using your computer or tablet, watching TV, or being on your phone for 30 to 60 minutes before bed. Electronic devices can be stimulating, making it harder for you to fall asleep. And their screens can also emit a type of light called blue light, which can interfere with the body's natural production of melatonin. Melatonin is a hormone linked with sleep.

Limit caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine. Each of these can work against restful sleep. Limit foods and drinks with caffeine after noon, including coffee, tea, soda, energy drinks, and chocolate. Alcohol may seem to make you drowsy, but it interferes with deep, restful sleep. Try alcohol-free alternatives, like fizzy water or alcohol-free beers, wines, and spirits.

Nicotine is a stimulant that prevents healthy sleep. Nicotine is in tobacco and many vaping products. The best thing you can do for your health is to quit smoking. It is never too late to quit. Talk to your doctor or call 1-800-QUIT-NOW for evidence-based treatment to help you reduce or quit smoking.

This handout is for informational purposes only. It should not be used in place of advice or instructions given by your doctor. Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have questions about your care.

Day	Example: Sunday	Day:
Mood	Worried	
Naps during the day? What time? How long?	2 - 2:30 p.m.	
What did I do right before bed?	Put on pajamas, watched tv, brushed my teeth	
What time I went to bed	11 p.m.	
What did I do in bed?	Checked email, read news	
Minutes to fall asleep	40 minutes	
What time I woke up	6:15 a.m.	
Number of times I woke up	2 times	
Number of hours slept	6 hours 35 minutes	
How rested I felt in the morning, 0-10	(10 most rested) 4/10	

TAKE ACTION

If you struggle with poor sleep, ask your doctor for help. They may be able to refer you to a provider who can help you identify approaches that can help improve your sleep.

Additional Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
cdc.gov/sleep/about
- Siteman Cancer Center Psychology Service: **314-747-5587**
- American Sleep Association:
sleepassociation.org
- Headspace:
headspace.com/sleep/sleephygiene
- Sleep Foundation:
sleepfoundation.org/sleep-hygiene

Visit siteman.wustl.edu for more information.



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