

# Getting Better Sleep: For People With Cancer

The recommendations in this guide are for people with sleep problems related to their cancer diagnosis.

## Why is sleep important?

Getting good sleep is important because it helps you to:

- Feel rested and less fatigued (tired)
- Cope better with your mood and emotions
- Boost your immune function (how your body fights off sickness) especially after cancer treatments
- Improve your quality of life

Most people need 7 to 9 hours of sleep to feel rested. You may need more or less sleep depending on your body's needs, age and overall health.

## When to speak to your health care provider about sleep

Nearly half of all people with cancer have trouble sleeping at some point during treatment and recovery. It is normal to have problems sleeping if it only happens once in a while.

You may have a sleep problem if you experience any of the symptoms below for more than 3 nights a week for a few weeks:

- Having a hard time falling asleep
- Waking up many times during the night and cannot fall back asleep
- Waking up very early in the morning
- Feeling tired or sleepy even after a night's sleep
- Feeling easily upset or unable to do your daily activities
- Having problems concentrating (focusing) during the day

If you have any of the symptoms listed above, speak to your cancer care team or your primary health care provider.

## Causes of sleep problems when you have cancer

Sleep problems can be caused by:

- Cancer symptoms (for example pain, fatigue (feeling tired), anxiety and depression)
- Stress of diagnosis and treatment
- Cancer treatments (for example hormonal therapy or chemotherapy)
- Medicines (for example steroids, antidepressants, anticonvulsants, or sedatives)

Do not stop taking your medicines even if you think they may be causing sleep problems. Speak to your health care provider about how to take your medications to lessen the impact on your sleep.

## Things you can do to get better sleep

The recommendations below can help you create a plan to get better sleep. Start with small changes that are easy to keep doing. It might take a few weeks to notice changes in your sleep. Stay consistent.

Some of the recommendations in this guide may not be possible for people who have advanced cancer. Speak with your health care provider for ideas to help improve your sleep if these recommendations don't work for you.

### Waking up

- Wake at the same time each day (regardless of how many hours of sleep you got)
- Go out in the sun, open the blinds, or turn on the lights within 30-60 minutes of waking

### Leaving your bed during the day

- Set up a comfortable chair or sofa to rest in during the day
- Avoid napping or only have one short nap (no more than 30 minutes) in the afternoon
- Aim to move your body for at least 20 minutes a day in whatever way feels comfortable (walking, stretching or yoga may be good choices)

It is best to do yoga with a certified yoga teacher, who can help you do the poses safely and without getting injured. If you have cancer in your bones, you should only do gentle yoga.

## **Eating and drinking**

- Avoid or limit caffeine (coffee, tea, chocolate) starting in the late afternoon
- Avoid drinking liquids close to bedtime
- Have a light snack before bed if you feel hungry
- Avoid heavy meals within 2-3 hours of bedtime

## **Getting ready for sleep**

- Turn off screens (phone, TV) at least 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Spend the 90 minutes (1.5 hours) before bedtime in dim light, doing relaxing activities, for example:
  - Reading, meditating or praying
  - Having a warm bath
  - Listening to audiobooks or calm music
- Go to bed at night when you feel sleepy even if that is before or after your normal bedtime
- If you are laying in bed for 20 to 30 minutes and have trouble falling asleep, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepier
- Use ear plugs, eye masks, noise machines or anything else that helps you sleep

## **Practice relaxation and mindfulness**

Relaxation and mindfulness exercises can help to clear your mind and make it easier to go to sleep.

For example:

- Mindfulness meditation (focusing on the present moment and quieting the mind)
- Deep breathing (focusing on your breath while breathing deeply)
- Progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and releasing your muscles to help you relax)
- Guided imagery (imagining yourself in a pleasant, calm place)
- Writing down your thoughts in a journal

Ask your health care team to help you learn more about these exercises.

## Other things that can help

### Keep track of your sleep

Tracking your sleep can help you know if your changes are working. Use a journal to keep track of:

- when you go to bed
- when you wake up
- the number of times you wake up at night

Share your journal with your healthcare provider when you talk about sleep.

### Therapy for sleep

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) is a type of therapy that helps you change the way you think about sleep and manage the impact of stress and emotions on your sleep. You can do CBT-I yourself or with a professional. You can learn more about CBT-I by reading the [Sleeping Well Manual](#) which is available on the de Souza Institute's website.

### Medications

Many people want to know if taking sleeping pills will help their sleep. Sleeping pills should only be used if your health care team has recommended them. Sleeping pills are powerful medications that can make you drowsy and confused during the day.

CBT-I is known to work better than sleeping pills. Talk to your health care provider before taking any sleep medicines, over-the-counter medicines or natural supplements.

## Where to get more information

The Canadian Cancer Society is a trusted source of information.

Visit them at [cancer.ca](https://cancer.ca) or phone 1-888-939-3333

For more information on this symptom, or for guides to help manage other symptoms, please visit [cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management](https://cancercareontario.ca/en/symptom-management).

The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus.

Ontario Health's patient guides provide information on managing cancer-related symptoms. They should be used for information only and do not replace medical advice. These guides do not include all information available about managing cancer-related symptoms. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information contained in our patient guides does not create a physician-patient relationship between Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) and you.

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