

Overcoming Insomnia

About one in three people with cancer report sleeping difficulties at some point during their treatment. Perhaps this is not surprising in view of the fear and uncertainty that cancer creates. Most insomnia problems are to do with getting off to sleep or waking in the night, followed by difficulty falling to sleep again. No matter what the pattern is, insomnia can be a truly miserable experience for sufferers.

There are many possible causes for why a particular person is not sleeping well – some physical, some emotional – so sorting out the reasons for a person’s insomnia can take a bit of trial and error. But, whatever its cause, if you follow the advice in this booklet there is a good chance that your sleeping difficulties will improve.

Three Common Myths about Sleep

Let’s start by talking about some common myths about sleep.

1. The first is the belief that lack of sleep is medically damaging for you. Surprisingly there is almost no evidence for this. The worst that insomnia can do is to cause difficulties during the day with concentration, learning and remembering things. People who are sleep-deprived also tend to have poor co-ordination which results in slow reaction times during activities like driving. Not surprisingly, sleepiness is the cause of many accidents. Also loss of sleep can magnify the effects of alcohol and this can cause its own problems. But although you may not perform your best after a bad night’s sleep, and may feel pretty awful, it is reassuring to know that you have not been medically harmed.
2. The second common myth about sleep is that people need 8 hours sleep a night. The truth is that people vary a great deal in how much sleep they need, with most people needing between 4 and 10 hours. Infants typically need about 16 hours and teenagers need about nine hours of sleep on average (though it’s true that some teenagers do appear to take rather more than this!). Winston

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Churchill famously only needed four or five hours a night. As people get older they sometimes need less sleep and often it becomes lighter and more broken, so sleep problems tend to be more common. But even in the worst cases of insomnia, the body will always snatch enough sleep for its physical needs. In fact, it seems that the mind and body can survive on very little sleep.

3. The third common mistake is to believe that we are the best judge of how much sleep we actually get. Most people with sleeping difficulties dramatically under-estimate the amount of time they are in fact asleep. The problem here is that people quickly begin to worry that they are not getting enough sleep, and end up trying so hard to get to sleep that they can't.

What do we know about sleep?

All animals need sleep for their survival and, as we have already said, people's bodies will always manage to snatch as much sleep as they *need*. But, although sleep takes up a big chunk of our lives, scientists are still trying to work out why exactly we need it. A common theory is that while we are asleep the cells in our body, especially the cells in our brains, are busy repairing themselves. Likewise, there have been many theories as to why we dream and what dreams may mean. Again, scientists don't really know but they think it may have something to do with how we organise and remember information we have taken in from the previous day. Whatever their function, it seems that both deep sleep and dream sleep are vitally important to our sense of well-being.

Throughout the night we move through different stages of sleep, from light sleep to deep sleep, to dream sleep, and then back to the beginning again. We can go through this cycle several times a night and, as the night progresses, we tend to spend more time in dream sleep. We typically spend about two hours each night dreaming even though we may remember nothing in the morning. Infants, by contrast, spend a great deal more of the night in dream sleep.

Learning to sleep

As any parent will tell you, when babies are born they generally don't have much sense of *when* they should be asleep! One of the things parents need to do is train their baby to sleep at regular times, preferably at night. Gradually, as the infant gets older, they learn that the rest of the world tends to sleep when it is dark and parents encourage them to adopt the same pattern. These sleep-wake rhythms, known as the '*sleep-wake cycle*', become quite fixed throughout life though they can easily be disrupted by things like shift-work or jet-lag.

Parents teach their children how to get to sleep by establishing fixed routines around going to bed: having a bath, brushing one's teeth, having a story read, kissing goodnight and then lights dimmed and off to sleep. These patterns become so routine that psychologists call them '*pre-sleep rituals*'. Interestingly, when you look at the way most adults go to bed, they too have their own pre-sleep rituals which tend to be the same every night. These pre-sleep habits help the brain know that it is time to sleep.

What causes sleep problems?

This is where it gets more complicated. There can be many different reasons people develop sleep problems so it's important to work out what may be causing your sleeping difficulty. Look through the following common causes of insomnia and put a check mark beside any of them that may be affecting you.

Medical treatment and being in hospital

Do you remember the old joke about the nurse who wakes up a patient to give them a sleeping pill? Well, if you have been in hospital, your normal sleep-wake rhythm may have become disrupted by the noise and different routines of life on the ward. In addition, some of the drugs used to treat cancer do seem to contribute to insomnia. Also people who have low iron levels in the blood can suffer poor sleep. Sleeping can also be disrupted by hot flushes during the night. Finally, your treatment may have led you to need to urinate more during the night so this can cause a disruption in your normal sleep cycle.

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Pain

Some cancers and their treatment are associated with pain and, naturally, pain can cause people to stay awake. Despite the fact that most pain can be successfully treated these days, many patients don't tell their doctors and nurses that they are suffering from pain. They sometimes worry that nothing can be done, that they don't want to be a nuisance or that they should grin and bear it. It's important to remember that the amount of pain you experience may have very little to do with the extent of your illness (for example, pricking your finger on a thorn can often cause a great deal more pain than something much more serious.) So if you suffer with pain, please tell one of the healthcare staff treating you so that they can help you with it.

Worry and Anxiety

Cancer involves many frightening experiences and uncertainties that may never have been faced before. People sometimes describe this as entering a foreign land where nothing seems familiar – hospitals, doctors, tests, demanding treatments, and all the familiar routines of normal daily life seem to have been turned upside down. With so many new experiences and so much uncertainty, people naturally fear what may be round the next corner. The result is anxiety.

Fear and anxiety are expressed in three ways: (1) in our bodies, (2) in the worrying thoughts we have, and (3) in our behaviour. When your body prepares itself for possible danger (fear of the unknown) it becomes tense and worked up – quite the opposite of the state one needs to be in to fall asleep. The trouble here is that the body can quickly get in the habit of being tense and over-aroused and this leads to insomnia. Also, with so much uncertainty in the air, it is easy to slip into the habit of worrying and ruminating about possible scenarios in the future. Of course, worrying is a common and normal human activity but it is no friend to getting a good night's sleep.

Depression

The many months of stress following a diagnosis and during treatment can lead people to feel emotionally exhausted and depressed. This is certainly not a sign of 'weakness' but is a common problem for many people with cancer. People who have become depressed often suffer with difficulty sleeping. This may take the form of not being able to get off to sleep, frequent waking during the night, or early morning wakening. If your mood is low most of the time, you feel hopeless about the future, and you no longer feel able to feel pleasure or joy from anything, then there's a good chance you are depressed. If so, you should ask to be referred for an assessment from a specialist like a clinical psychologist.

Disturbance of the sleep-wake cycle.

Many cancer treatments cause fatigue or physical tiredness. Not surprisingly people often respond to their tiredness by having a nap during the day. However, while this can be a good strategy in the short term, too much sleep during the day can make it more difficult to sleep at night. And if people don't sleep well at night they are going to feel more tired the next day, prompting them to have an even longer nap. In time this can lead a person's body clock to become 'out of synch' – their bodies expect to sleep during the day, not at night.

The other way things can go wrong with the sleep-wake cycle is when you find yourself waking up at the same time night after night. This may have started because you needed to go to the toilet during the night and since then it has become a habit to wake at roughly the same time. Intensely frustrating? Yes, and this may be part of the problem.

Diet

One of the most common causes of insomnia is people's diet. For example, a number of drinks have active chemicals in them such as caffeine which cause us to stay awake. Tea, coffee, and even cocoa and chocolate-based drinks (including fizzy cola drinks) contain these stimulants (making us feel more awake) which can go on working for

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several hours after they have been drunk. Small amounts of alcohol also act as a stimulant while large quantities make us more depressed. Too much alcohol can lead people to wake up because as its depressive effects wear off during the night it can become more of a stimulant again.

Lack of physical activity

Human beings may be different from every other animal but we are still just animals! Our bodies have developed over millions of years of evolution to be strong and athletic and until just a few hundred years ago every person would have been physically active every day. Exercise is therefore what the body needs in order for it to stay healthy. Exercise also enables us to sleep better since it helps burn up the energy that we take in when we eat and any stress that we have picked up throughout the day. Of course many cancers and their treatment make it difficult for people to take as much exercise as they are used to and insomnia can be one result.

Poor sleep hygiene

This one doesn't sound very nice, does it? All it means is that for whatever reason, people have lost their normal sleeping habits or tend to behave in ways that are unhelpful to a good night's rest. As mentioned above, most people develop pre-sleep rituals in their childhood and keep some sort of set pattern of going to bed throughout their lives (e.g. watching TV, turning off the lights, going upstairs, go to the loo, wash and brush teeth, read for a bit in bed, light out, sleep). If your own pattern of going to bed gets disrupted you may have lost the normal cues that tell your brain that it's time to fall asleep. Some people spend hours in bed watching television, listening to the radio or even eating. These activities can weaken the link your brain makes between being in bed and being asleep.

And what do you do if you do wake up? It probably won't help if you immediately get up and make yourself a cup of tea, or immediately start planning what you are going to do the next day. These simply cause you to wake up further!

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Hopefully you will have ticked one or two of the possible causes of your insomnia above. Now let's look at what you can do about tackling these causes and overcoming your insomnia. Remember that whatever you try to change, the effect probably won't be instant so you must be patient. It's also a good idea to try ***one thing at a time*** rather than everything at once so that you can see what is working and what is not. The only reliable way to know whether or not something is working is to keep a reasonably accurate record of it. Now it's important not to become too obsessed about this but you might like to try keeping a sleep record for a week before you even try any of the tips in this booklet. Try to keep a record of roughly when you fell asleep, how long you were awake (if this applies) and when you finally woke up. It's also useful to note down what you ate and drank in the hours before you went to bed (*see page 15*).

Many of the tips below involve training your mind and body to get into better habits. It's worth thinking about each one, just in case they help.

The sleeping environment and being in hospital

It may be obvious but sleeping on a good quality mattress that suits your body can make a big difference to how well you sleep. Similarly ensure that your bedclothes are comfortable and suitable for the temperature of the room. Ensure that there is fresh air coming into the room to prevent it from becoming too stuffy or too hot. It is probably better that the room is a little too cool than a little too warm. Ensure that the bedroom is dark and quiet. Block out any irritating noises or wear earplugs.

While in hospital it may be helpful to use earplugs to block out all those unfamiliar sounds and even an eye-mask to block out the ward's lights. Many people find that once they get home from hospital their sleeping improves quite quickly but if your sleep-wake cycle has become disrupted then you will need to retrain your brain and body. Night time hot flushes can be a really frustrating problem. You may benefit from a low dose of an anti-depressant (venlafaxine) which seems to reduce the number of hot

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flushes in some patients. If persistent hot flushes are a problem for you, ask your doctor whether this is something you could try to see if it works for you.

Pain

Many patients don't tell the healthcare staff treating them that they are in pain despite the fact that these days most pain can be very effectively treated. So why be in pain? Some people worry that they might one day need pain killers and if they get used to the drugs they are taking they will stop working. This is simply not true; there are always other drugs or higher doses. People simply do not need to be in pain so please do tell the staff or your GP if you are suffering with it.

Worry

Cancer introduces a lot of uncertainty and new experiences into people's lives. As a result we naturally worry about the future, or other people, or ourselves. Unfortunately lying in bed, with nothing else to distract us, is an excellent opportunity to worry! In the middle of the night we tend to have our most catastrophic thoughts and it is a time when we can feel most alone. In other words, it would be far better to find another time of day in which to do your worrying. So instead of doing it at night, plan for a specific time in the day (perhaps the evening) when you will go through each of your worries, preferably with someone who will listen and help you make sense of them. It can help to write your worries down because this often makes them appear more controllable.

The main problem with worry is that it is the brain's way of telling us that something we value is under threat and that we should do something about it. The worry intrudes on our thoughts without being invited. There are two ways to stop worrying thoughts: distracting ourselves from them by having other thoughts, and finding a way of thinking about them so they lose their power over us. And you can try both strategies.

Distraction

Rather than going to sleep worrying about things over which one may have little control, why not try reading a book – something fun and imaginative – and fall asleep thinking about that. Reading not only helps us fall asleep but also enables us to enter the interesting world the author has created. If you wake during the night try to remember the story - what was happening when you put down the book to turn off the light? Surprisingly many people find this simple tip to be very helpful.

Taking the sting out of our worries

When we worry it is important that we are prepared to question our own thinking. Is it realistic? Are we imagining a catastrophe which may well not even occur? Is there a more sensible or reasoned way of thinking about the situation? During the day, when you are not trying to get to sleep, consider each worry in turn and try not to stop yourself thinking about it even when it becomes difficult. Don't simply dwell on worst-case scenarios but remind yourself that other outcomes are possible too and may even be a lot more likely.

Another way of approaching this is to force ourselves to think about the worst-case scenario – the very catastrophe we most fear. Often our thinking takes us up to the most awful moment we can imagine, like a snapshot of the future, and then we feel so upset we stop thinking about it. It can be helpful to think beyond this in order to realise that, whatever happens, the world will go on and we will get through it, and so will others. Again it's best to do this during the day, and preferably with someone we trust. Talk through in detail what actually *would* happen if this very worst case scenario came to pass. Are you worrying about you or other people? Remember that no catastrophe lasts forever. Think about the day after. The day after that. A week later. A month. A year. By taking the sting out of the danger posed by our worry we remove its power and the worrying thoughts are no longer the uninvited visitors they once were.

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Worrying about not getting enough sleep

One of the most common stories of people who suffer with insomnia is that when they wake up they lie for hours frustrated that they are not sleeping and worried they will feel awful the next day if they don't get back to sleep. Of course it is often this frustration and worry that is keeping them awake! This sort of mental torture is brought about by people believing the myths about sleep that we listed at the beginning of this booklet. The truth is that not having as much sleep as you would ideally like is not harmful to you medically, we often get more than we think we are getting, and we can function surprisingly well with very little sleep. So, rather than trying so hard to get to sleep and becoming frustrated if you are not, why not use the time simply to rest. Rest is very good for you and is best achieved by completely relaxing all the muscles in your body. Put away that illuminated alarm clock so you don't watch the seconds ticking by!

Fear and Anxiety

When you think about it, most people tend to do relaxing things in the evening before they go to bed. We tend to watch TV or read, or listen to the radio. Our bodies are calming down after the stresses of the day, preparing themselves for falling asleep. This is what we should all aim for.

But what happens to our bodies when we feel we are in danger? Like other animals, when we feel the emotion fear the muscles in our bodies immediately tense up so as to be ready to run away. But this is not all. We also breathe a little more quickly to take in more oxygen, our hearts beat faster to move the oxygen around our body to give the muscles energy and we become warmer, causing us to perspire to keep the body cool. All these changes happen automatically – we don't have to think about them. The trouble is that in order to sleep our bodies need to be calm and relaxed. Many people have no idea how to relax completely so they have to learn to do so. If possible obtain a relaxation booklet and a tape or CD of relaxation exercises to practise at home. These can be obtained from the Cancer Information and Support Centre. Essentially

you need to practise letting go all the tension in every muscle in your body by starting at one end of your body and working through all the muscle groups. By noticing throughout the day where your body has become tense and simply letting go this tension, you can gradually learn to become a more calm and relaxed person. Believe it or not, learning to relax can have a huge number of positive effects so it's worth learning no matter how old you are and whether or not you suffer with insomnia!

Depression

Depression has more than one meaning. Everyone can feel sad, hopeless or downhearted at some point in their lives and certainly cancer can involve disappointments and losses of one kind or another. People often say they feel depressed at times like this. But clinical depression is when the person persistently feels so low that they have trouble sleeping and eating, they are unable to enjoy anything and feel entirely hopeless about the future. If you worry that you have reached this level of depression then it's wise to talk to a professional about it: your specialist nurse, your hospital doctor or your GP. They may offer you pills called antidepressants or refer you to a clinical psychologist. Using talking therapies, psychologists enable you to get to the bottom of why you are feeling so low and help you find ways out of your depression. The main thing to remember is that being depressed is neither your fault nor a sign of weakness. It can happen to anyone and this is why most cancer hospitals these days employ a clinical psychologist.

Fatigue and disturbance of the sleep-wake cycle.

If you have got into the habit of sleeping during the day because you feel so tired, this may be affecting your sleep-wake cycle with the result that you no longer sleep well at night. The solution is to train yourself back into better habits! To some extent only you will know what you can manage but try to cut down or eliminate any sleeps or catnaps during the day and stick to a regular routine of only sleeping at night. To begin with you might need to go to bed slightly earlier than normal but it's better to move to normal sleeping hours as soon as possible. Surprisingly people

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often find that if they take a little more exercise during the day they don't need a nap during the day quite as much.

Finally, persistent fatigue (for more than 3 months) after treatment has finished should be thoroughly assessed. You may wish to attend a fatigue management course if there is one available. If you've got into the habit of waking at the same time every night, try to resist the temptation to get up. Unless you really need to go to the toilet see if you can turn over and drop off to sleep again. The trick is to fool your brain into thinking you do sleep all night so that this becomes the new habit! So the less physical disruption to your rest during the night the better. See the other tips in this booklet for dropping off to sleep.

Diet

Think carefully about what you eat throughout the day and ensure that you are not drinking any stimulants such as tea, coffee, cocoa or chocolate any later than 4 to 6 hours before you go to bed. Too much alcohol can also cause insomnia (see above). As any baby will tell you, milky drinks are thought to be good for sleeping because they contain enzymes that help induce sleepiness. Avoid very spicy or sugary food before you go to bed since these can keep you awake. Be sure you don't go to bed either very full or hungry since both can disturb your sleep, though a small bedtime snack can sometimes help one feel more sleepy. And remember that smoking is a stimulant and should be avoided around bedtime.

Physical activity

Many cancer treatments make people feel ill and exhausted. The result is that they stay at home or in hospital where they take barely any exercise at all. Human beings evolved to be physically active and without sufficient exercise many aspects of our health suffer. Regular physical exercise helps keep the body and its organs (especially the heart) in good working order and prevents the build up of fat and obesity. It also helps us sleep. Of course you should only take exercise when you are ready for it so, if you are unsure, it is important to take advice about when this is.

In addition to keeping a record of how long you sleep, start recording how much exercise you take during the day. Try each day to increase the amount of exercise you take by a little, without becoming a fanatic! Even taking a gentle walk every day and building this up slowly, making it a little longer each week, can sometimes have a dramatic effect on sleep. Of course, it's not a good idea to take strenuous exercise just before you go to bed, though releasing sexual frustration may enable you to relax more.

People who are suffering with persistent fatigue (more than 3 months after treatment has ended) often feel that taking exercise is the last thing they would wish to do. While this is a very understandable response, the research indicates that exercise is effective in overcoming fatigue by slowly building up the body's stamina and inducing better sleep at night.

Poor sleep hygiene – the bed is for sleeping only!

Get in the habit of going to bed at the same time and in the same way. This is where pre-sleep rituals can be so important. Avoid staying up late one night and then going to bed earlier the next. Keep your pattern of going to bed as regular as possible so that your brain knows that it's time to fall asleep. Make it the same pattern every night; for example, turn off the lights, go upstairs, go to the loo, wash and brush teeth, read for a bit in bed, turn the light off, sleep. Try to avoid doing anything in bed other than sleep. Over time you need to strengthen the link your brain makes between lying in bed and sleeping. So avoid eating, watching TV or listening to the radio for long periods of time. Reading for a few minutes, however, is often good because, if you are tired, it will allow you to feel more sleepy while thinking about someone else's story, not your own. After turning out the light, use the story you are reading as something to think about as you drift off to sleep.

If you wake during the night try not to get up unless you can help it. Use the time to relax and rest your body so that the next night your brain's clock is less likely to wake you. If, on waking during the night, you find yourself immediately worrying, try to return to the story in the book you have been reading and focus your thoughts on that (*see the section on Worry above*). Remind yourself that there will be plenty of time for

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worrying the next day if it's needed but that night is a good time to take rest.

Only if you have been awake for over half an hour should you think about getting up and walking into another room. Remember that we want to avoid any association with the bed as a place of torture (e.g. trying too hard to get to sleep)! Instead we want to preserve the link between the bed and restfulness. If possible sit in a chair and relax or possibly read. Keep the lights low to encourage you to feel sleepy again. Avoid any stimulation such as TV or radio. When you feel sleepy again quietly return to bed and notice the weight of your body sinking into the bed, remembering to focus on resting and allowing sleep to come of its own accord.

Other tips

- Try relaxing in a warm bath just before bedtime, perhaps with the addition of some oils or bath salts (lavender or geranium oil are thought to be particularly relaxing)
- Some people find that sprinkling a few drops of lavender oil on their pillow helps them relax and sleep better
- Try to stay awake! Yes, this sounds very odd, doesn't it? But by trying to stay awake you take the pressure off yourself to sleep and, paradoxically, many people find they drop off more easily.
- You may be aiming for more sleep than you need. So try reducing the amount of time you sleep at night by setting an alarm clock to wake you. It may be hard to get up the first morning you try this, but you may find it easier to get to sleep quickly when you go to bed.
- Be sure to get lots of daylight during the day if you can. This can help your body clock know when it is time to sleep and when it is time to be awake.

Sleep Diary

DAY OF WEEK	FELL ASLEEP	AWAKE DURING THE NIGHT	WOKE UP IN MORNING	TOTAL HOURS OF SLEEP	FOOD/DRINK/ EXERCISE
MONDAY					
TUESDAY					
WEDNESDAY					
THURSDAY					
FRIDAY					
SATURDAY					
SUNDAY					
MONDAY					
TUESDAY					
WEDNESDAY					
THURSDAY					
FRIDAY					
SATURDAY					
SUNDAY					

Overcoming Insomnia *in the Context of Cancer*

A Self-Help Guide

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