

# Sleep Management

Sleep is an important part of physical and mental health. While we sleep, the brain and body do a number of important jobs that help us stay in good health and function at our best. Being well rested can improve energy and help you cope better with the side effects of cancer and treatment.

Disturbed sleep is a very common problem faced by cancer patients. Lack of sleep can cause you to feel distressed, exhausted, less motivated and less capable of coping with pain or discomfort. Sleep problems may include:

- Difficulty falling asleep
- Difficulty maintaining sleep (repeated waking)
- Early waking
- Excessive daytime sleepiness.

## Phases of Sleep

There are two main phases of sleep and both are needed in order to get a good night's sleep. The two phases are rapid eye movement (REM) and non-rapid eye movement (NREM). The phases of sleep repeat during the night in a cycle of NREM phase followed by a REM phase. This cycle normally occurs four to six times per night during seven to eight hours of sleep.

- REM sleep is the phase in which our brain is active and is when dreaming occurs
- NREM is the restful phase and has four stages from light sleep to deep sleep.

Normal sleep patterns differ from person to person. The amount of sleep you need to feel rested may be less or more than others. However if sleep does not last long enough the brain cannot finish all the tasks that help to restore itself.

## Causes of sleep disturbance

There are many reasons that a person with cancer may have trouble sleeping including:

- Physical changes caused by cancer or treatment
- Irregular sleep routine
- Emotions such as grief, fear or frustration especially in relation to a diagnosis
- Side effects of drugs such as steroids or pain medications
- Pain, nausea or diarrhoea
- Being in a noisy or uncomfortable environment
- Poor nutrition including excessive caffeine or alcohol consumption
- Mental stimulation just prior to bedtime
- Dwelling on stressful or complex issues
- Worrying about sleep problems.

## Strategies for managing sleep

Sleep disturbance is often quite treatable or manageable. It is important to identify the factors that are causing your sleep disturbance so that appropriate advice can be given. Everyone is different therefore some strategies may be more effective than others. Strategies which can be helpful include:

### Behavioural strategies

- Establish and maintain a sleep routine. Go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning. Additionally, prepare your body for sleep in the same way each night eg. have a shower then brush your teeth
- Avoid excessive daytime naps. If you need to nap, do so earlier in the day and aim for no longer than 30 minutes
- Avoid mental stimulation before bed and instead engage in relaxing activities
- Resolve worries prior to bedtime. Write down your worries if they arise so they can be dealt with the following day
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation or visual imagery
- Use the ABC Method for getting to sleep
  - A: Awareness of your thinking
  - B: Breathing slowly/deeply
  - C: Change your thoughts e.g. Silently tell yourself “I am relaxed, tired and I am going to sleep”.

### Environmental strategies

- Only use your bedroom for sleeping. Avoid watching television in bed or working in the bedroom
- Create a comfortable bed and bedroom
  - Turn off lighting
  - Minimise disruptive noises
  - Keep the room at a comfortable temperature
  - Dress in loose, soft clothing
  - Use pillows to get into a comfortable position.

### General health strategies

- Avoid heavy, spicy or sugary foods before bedtime as they require digestion
- Avoid drinking alcohol or caffeinated drinks before bedtime as these will make it more difficult to fall asleep and will reduce the depth and quality of sleep
- Participate in regular daily exercise but try to avoid exercising within three hours before bedtime
- Regulate your bowel and bladder habits. Avoid drinking a lot of fluids at night time and use the bathroom before going to bed.

**Please contact your therapist if you have any queries or concerns.**

**Therapist:** \_\_\_\_\_

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