CANCER MIND CARE

Date: Oct 18 2026

Sleep Problems

Topics covered on this page

- Why is sleep important?
- How can I sleep better?
- What should I do if I can't sleep?
- Further information and support services

Why is sleep important?

We all need to sleep. Sleep is an important part of:

- Restoring our energy
- Repairing our bodies
- Processing information to learn new things

Each night you cycle through different types of sleep, including:

- Light and drowsy sleep
- Deep sleep that restores our energy
- "Rapid Eye Movement" sleep, when dreams occur

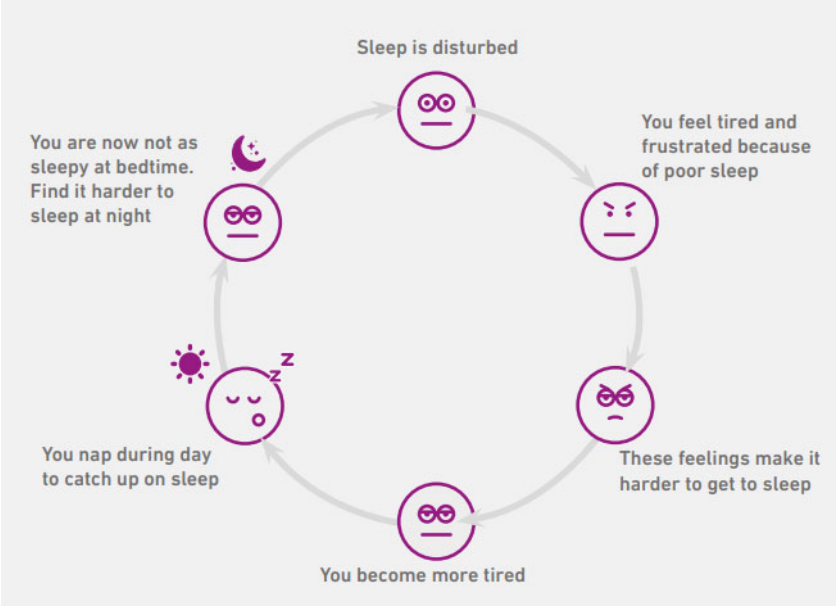
You cycle through these different types of sleep, and it is normal to wake briefly a number of times throughout the night.

It is also normal to experience times when you don't get enough sleep. This might be because your sleep is disrupted by life situations like noise, shift work, parenting responsibilities, or health issues (such as when you have cancer and go through treatment).

When you have poor sleep you can experience a range of problems such as:

- Low energy and fatigue
- Poor concentration and memory
- Irritability
- Tearfulness
- Lower tolerance for pain and stress
- Difficulty managing anxiety or low mood

The vicious cycle of sleep problems



Source: Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre: Can-Sleep self-help booklet

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How does cancer impact sleep?

It is very common for sleep to be disrupted by:

- Cancer
- Cancer treatments
- Treatment side effects like pain, hot flushes and nausea.

Cancer and its treatment demands can also disrupt our sleep by increasing:

- Anxiety
- Worrying
- Stress
- Grief
- Sadness
- Other emotional difficulties

Consider talking to your General Practitioner (GP) or oncology team if you are having problems sleeping. It is often possible to treat sleep problems, or better manage side-effects that are disrupting sleep.

How can you sleep better?

Our bodies are really good at catching on sleep when we have experienced some sleep disruption.

However, it is important to make sure that you are giving yourself the best chance to regain a good sleep pattern.

Here are some common causes of sleep problems that you might need to address:

Establish a sleep routine

Try to get up at the same time each day. This will help your body clock know when to wake up and when to sleep.

Healthy diet

Try to eat a well-balanced diet and at regular times, and not in the hours before bed.

Caffeine

Avoid caffeine (e.g. tea/coffee), energy drinks, and other stimulants like nicotine in the evenings.

Alcohol

Avoid too much alcohol at night, especially just before bed. They can be relaxing, but actually make the quality of sleep very poor.

Overactive mind

In the evening, only do activities that are calming and help you wind down (e.g. listening to music, audiobooks, or a meditation).

Exercise

Exercise in the daytime (not before bed) helps you to build a drive for sleep.

Daytime napping

Avoid daytime napping, or if you must nap, try to nap at a regular time and briefly (e.g. 30 minutes)

Excessive light

In the evenings, reduce the light in your room (e.g. have only one small lamp on and try not to use bright screens).

Using bed for activities other than sleep

Try not to do other activities in bed, you want your body to associate bed with sleep.

Go to bed when sleepy

Don't miss good opportunities of sleepiness in evening. Similarly, don't lie in bed for long periods of time if you're not sleepy, stay up and do relaxing activities until you feel sleepy.

Stress and low mood

Explore ways to reduce stress and improve your mood (e.g. self-care, seeking support from family or

friends, speaking to a therapist). Helping yourself to be in a good emotional state can improve sleep.

What are unhelpful thoughts about sleep?

Some thoughts and beliefs we have about sleep can make it even harder to fall asleep. If you are saying stressful things to yourself about sleep (e.g. "I'm never going to get to sleep", or "This is going to ruin my day tomorrow"), you might need to catch these and change those thoughts to something more helpful, like:

- "Peaceful rest is also good for me."
- "Sleep problems are normal."
- "This won't last forever."
- "If I don't sleep very well tonight, I'll catch up on sleep tomorrow."

What should you do if you can't sleep?

If you are trying to sleep for 20-30 minutes and still feel awake (i.e. not sleepy or drowsy), it is often best to stop trying to sleep. This can make you frustrated, which makes it more difficult to sleep. Instead, you can:

- Get out of bed, and leave the bedroom if you can
- If you are worried about a specific problem, write down one positive action you can do tomorrow to address it (e.g. ask someone for advice)
- Try to stay in low lighting and avoid using bright screens
- Do something quiet and relaxing (e.g. calming music, reading, meditation)
- Notice yourself becoming more relaxed and sleepy, and go back to bed when ready

What else can help?

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

This is one of the best treatments for night time sleep problems and can be accessed by seeing a Psychologist.

Prescription medication

There are a number of medications that may help with sleep, you can discuss with your treating doctor or GP.

Sleep aides

Examples of over-the-counter sleep aides are anti-histamines, valerian, chamomile, lavender, and certain vitamins. Discuss with treating doctor if you plan to try these to ensure there is no conflict with any treatment medications.

Further information and support services

Further information

Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre - Can-Sleep Self-Help Booklet
Download Guide

Better Health Channel - Sleep hygiene information
Visit Website

Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) – Sleepless nights: Breast cancer and sleep fact sheet
Visit Website

AYA Cansleep booklet
Visit Website

Finding a mental health professional

You can begin by speaking to your General Practitioner (GP). GPs can discuss your emotional concerns with you and can link you to supports in the local community, such as a psychologist or social worker.

You can also speak to your cancer clinician. Most cancer services have a range of psychological support options including psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses and psychiatrists. If this isn't available at your local health service, ask them what support is available in the local community.

You can find a local Psychologist with a referral or a mental health care plan from your GP.

Search for a local Psychologist
Visit Website

Search for a local Psychiatrist
Visit Website

Health Direct

Health Direct provides information about what a mental health care plan is and how you can work with your GP to access a mental health care plan.

Visit Website

Online self-help programs and smartphone apps

This Way Up - Insomnia course

This Way Up is a trusted Australian provider of evidence-based, internet-delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (iCBT) programs.

Visit Website

Podcasts

SleepHub podcast - Sleep and Cancer

Visit Website

Relaxation and mindfulness

Cancer Council NSW – Finding calm during cancer

Meditation and relaxation practices

Visit Website

Headspace

Meditation and mindfulness app

Visit Website

Smiling Mind

Web and app-based meditation program

Visit Website

Cancer support services

Cancer Council Victoria

A non-profit cancer charity organisation involved in cancer research, patient support, cancer prevention and advocacy.

Call 13 11 20 to speak with a cancer nurse
Visit Website
Support Groups
Cancer Connect peer support
Online Community

WeCan

A supportive care website

Visit Website

Telephone support services

Beyond Blue

All calls are with a trained mental health professional, and completely confidential. They will only ask you your first name and you can remain completely anonymous.

Phone: 1300 224 636
Visit Website

Lifeline

Lifeline provides all Australians experiencing a personal crisis have access to 24-hour crisis support by trained professional

Phone: 13 11 14
Visit Website

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