

## **Managing Sleep Problems**

This handout offers information on how to manage sleep problems. Many people with cancer have problems sleeping during treatment and recovery because of:

- Physical changes caused by cancer or surgery (example: pain)
- Side effects from treatment or other medications
- Stress, anxiety, or depression

This is normal.

You may be experiencing sleep problems if you:

- Have a hard time falling or staying asleep
- Wake up many times during the night and have difficulty falling back to sleep
- Wake up feeling tired or not refreshed by sleep
- Feel very tired during the day
- Move around a lot during your sleep
- Have problems concentrating during the day
- Feel irritable and are unable to do your regular activities

Getting good sleep is important for your mental and physical health. It can improve your quality of life and overall well-being.

### **What you can do to manage sleep problems**

Your healthcare team may use the term ‘sleep hygiene’. Sleep hygiene is the term used to describe the habits and routines you can use to have a good night’s sleep.

1. Keep a sleep routine.  
Go to bed and wake up about the same time every day. You may need to use an alarm clock to help you with this.
2. Do not nap during the day if possible.  
Naps can prevent you from having a good night’s sleep. If you need to nap, avoid doing so late in the day. Keep the nap to less than 30 minutes.
3. Be physically active.  
Regular physical activity can help improve your sleep. Be physically active for at least 20 to 30 minutes every day if possible. Make sure to do any physical activity or exercise early in the day. Do not exercise before your bedtime.
4. Avoid screen time before bedtime.  
Stop watching TV or using a computer/phone/tablet for at least 1 hour before your bedtime.

5. Eating and drinking.

Do not drink liquids that include caffeine or alcohol or eat a heavy meal within 2 to 3 hours of your bedtime. Caffeine and alcohol may disrupt your ability to have a good night's sleep. Heavy meals can cause indigestion or discomfort that may prevent you from sleeping.

6. Comfortable sleeping area.

Having a comfortable place to sleep is important. Make sure the room is quiet, dark, and a comfortable temperature. Relax before bedtime.

Dim the lights 1 hour before you plan to go to sleep. This can help your body to relax before bedtime. Try relaxing activities such as reading, meditation, listening to calming music, or having a bath.

7. Avoid lying awake in bed.

Get out of bed and do something relaxing until you feel tired if you do not fall asleep within 30 minutes. Return to your bed and try to go to sleep.

8. Use your bed for sleep and intimate activity only.

Do not spend time in your bed during the day doing activities like watching TV or reading. Make sure your bedroom feels like a comfortable and stress-free space.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team before using any over the counter medication to help you sleep.

## **Sleep Therapy**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) is a type of therapy that helps you change the way you think about sleep. It can help you manage the impact of stress and emotions on your sleep. You can do CBT-I yourself or with a professional. CBT-I is known to work better than sleeping pills.

The following are some useful resources and supports that can help you improve your sleep:

1. **SleepWell**

Offers information and resources to help you improve sleep using CBT-I. It also offers sleep diaries, a sleep hygiene checklist, and a list of recommended books, apps, and websites. For more information, go to the website found at:

[mysleepwell.ca](https://mysleepwell.ca)

2. **Sleeping Well Manual**

The de Souza Institute offers information for people with cancer who want to try CBT-I, including relaxation and problem-solving exercises. For more information, go to the website found at: [help.desouzainstitute.com/kb/articles/sleeping-well-manual](https://help.desouzainstitute.com/kb/articles/sleeping-well-manual)

**3. CBT-I Coach App**

A mobile app that offers structured programs, sleep tracking, relaxation exercises, and helpful tips to help improve sleep. Go to the website found at: [mobile.va.gov/app/cbt-i-coach](https://mobile.va.gov/app/cbt-i-coach)

**4. Canadian Sleep Society**

Offers information, podcasts, and recommendations for books on improving sleep. Go to the website found at: [css-scs.ca](https://css-scs.ca)

**5. Sleep On It**

Offers information and tools for improving sleep, such as sleep diaries, podcast recommendations, and more. Go to the website found at: [sleeponitcanada.ca](https://sleeponitcanada.ca)

**6. Sleep Health Foundation**

Offers educational materials, factsheets, and support for individuals with sleep problems. Go to the website found at [sleephealthfoundation.org.au](https://sleephealthfoundation.org.au)

Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or concerns about any of the information in this handout.

*This handout was created by the Patient Education Program at the Durham Regional Cancer Centre/Lakeridge Health. It was last reviewed in May of 2025.*