

# Improving the quality of your sleep



Many people with cancer say that they feel tired a lot of the time, but find it difficult to “switch off” and sleep. This is something you should mention to your specialist doctor and/or treating team. However, making some simple changes to your sleeping environment, lifestyle and your way of thinking about sleep, may also help too.

## Adjusting your environment

- ☑ Remove any clocks that are visible or accessible from your bed. Knowing the time and/or being tempted to check it is likely to wake you up and make you more worried about not being asleep.
- ☑ Minimise the amount of light and noise in your bedroom (use an eye mask and/or ear plugs if necessary).
- ☑ Ensure your bedroom is the right temperature (consider using another blanket, opening a window, turning on a fan if necessary).

## Adjusting your thinking

- ☑ Many people affected by cancer find themselves lying awake in bed at night, which is frustrating. While this may be caused by genuine concerns about your health and/or treatment, it often turns into worry about not sleeping, which in turn makes it more difficult to get to sleep. A good alternative is to get out of bed and do something distracting yet relaxing such as reading a book, listening to music or having a glass of water and only going back to bed when you feel really sleepy.
- ☑ If you find this doesn't work, another strategy you can try is to get out of bed and deliberately pay attention to the thoughts that show up in your mind and the feelings that show up in your body. If the thoughts are things you can do something about, write a note to yourself to remind you to deal with them in the morning. If they're feelings or thoughts about things that you cannot change, imagine putting each thought on a leaf, placing the leaf in a stream and watching it float away. Over time you may notice the same sorts of thoughts coming up again and again. You may like to give those thoughts a name such as the “I'm a burden story” or the “This is all too hard story”. You could try naming unhelpful feelings in the same way, like “There goes anger”. It's important to remember that these thoughts are just thoughts, not necessarily the truth. Our mind often plays tricks on us by replaying these thoughts over and over again and making us believe they are true. Often people find if they can notice when this is happening and name the ‘stories’ or visualise the thoughts, it's easier to let them go.
- ☑ [Progressive muscle relaxation](#) is another good way to help you relax if you are lying in bed, getting frustrated about being awake and find that you are tossing and turning a lot.

## Adjusting your behaviour/lifestyle

- ☑ Your bed and bedroom need to be things that you associate with sleep. Avoid doing other things like watching TV, eating or reading in bed, and only go to bed when you feel sleepy so that when you put your head on your pillow, your body is trained to associate it with going to sleep.
- ☑ Increase the amount of exercise you do (but not within a few hours of bed time).
- ☑ Avoid heavy meals, caffeine (coke, coffee, tea), nicotine (cigarettes) and sugar for a few hours before bed time.
- ☑ Avoid alcohol. Although it might make you get to sleep more quickly, it compromises the quality of your sleep in the second half of the night and as its effects wear off, it's likely to make you get up for the toilet or a drink of water.
- ☑ If possible, deal with upsetting or worrying things and do your [problem solving](#) early in the day. Plan to do relaxing activities in the afternoon and evening.
- ☑ Get out of bed at a similar time each day and if possible, expose yourself to some sunlight in the morning.
- ☑ Develop some pre-bedtime rituals such as doing breathing exercises or relaxing stretches for 15 minutes before bed, to help remind your body that it's almost time to sleep.
- ☑ Try having shorter naps during the day so you feel sleepier at night.
- ☑ Read more about [how to manage the side effects of treatment](#). Effective management of these is likely to make it easier to sleep.

**List five things you could change to try to improve the quality of your sleep:**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

You may find it helpful to keep track of your sleeping habits and pre-bedtime activities using the following sleep diary for a couple of weeks. This can help you identify the lifestyle, attitudinal and environmental factors that are affecting the quality of your sleep. When you've filled it out for a few days or more, look for patterns in when you do and don't sleep well and adjust what you do accordingly.

# Sleep diary



Country  
Cancer  
Support  
South Australia

	Significant events	Alcohol, caffeine & nicotine consumption	Naps <i>(number &amp; duration)</i>	Activities before bed <i>(e.g. dinner at 7, TV)</i>	Activities in bed <i>(e.g. read for ½ hour)</i>	Time lights off	Amount of time to fall asleep	Time woke up	Number of times woke	Hours slept	Rest score <i>(0= not rested, 10= well rested)</i>
Mon											
Tues											
Wed											
Thurs											
Fri											
Sat											
Sun											

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