Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Improving Your Sleep During Your Hospital Stay

This information will help you improve your sleep during your hospital stay.

Sleeping well at night can make you feel better and give you more energy. It can also help you fight off infections and heal your wounds.

Changes in sleep pattern

Some people have a hard time sleeping while they're in the hospital. Changes to your normal sleep pattern may be caused by lots of things. Here are some examples:

- Lighting in the hospital room may be too bright at night or too dark during the day.
- Treatments and checkups during the night may keep you awake. Your roommate getting care may also keep you up.
- Side effects from medicines might keep you awake or make you sleepy during the day, so you can't fall asleep at night.
- Symptoms caused by your cancer or treatment, such as anxiety, pain, trouble breathing, or needing to go to the bathroom a lot.

Ways to improve sleep

If you have trouble sleeping through the night or you feel tired the next day, try the ideas below:

Bring items from home

You may want to bring some items to the hospital to help you sleep and make you feel more comfortable. If you don't already have these with you, you may want to ask someone to bring them for you.

These items can include:

- Earplugs
- An eye mask
- Headphones
- A bathrobe
- Slippers
- A pillow

During the day

Let light in your room

- Open your window shades in the morning and get as much natural daylight as you can. If possible, sit by a window during the day. Natural light helps your body know when it's time to be awake and when it's time to sleep.

Stay active during the day

- Try to do some light physical activities, if you're able.
- Walk around the hospital floor, if you're able.
- Do exercises in your bed or chair. Ask your nurse for the resource *General Exercise Program: Level 1* (www.mskcc.org/pe/general-exercise-1).
- Keep your mind active during the day by reading, doing puzzles, talking with visitors, or doing other activities you enjoy.

Limit your napping

- Taking naps in the late afternoon can make it harder for you to fall asleep at night.
- If you feel like you need to nap, take one earlier in the day and set an alarm to wake you up after 30 minutes.

Speak with your healthcare provider

- Ask your doctor or nurse if they can change your medicine schedule so that you aren't woken up during the night to take it.

At bedtime

Keep a regular sleep schedule

- Try to go to bed and get up about the same time every day.
- About 1 hour before bedtime, start getting ready for sleep. Following the same bedtime routine each night can help your body prepare for sleep.

Limit food and drinks

- Avoid caffeine, such as coffee, black or green tea, sodas, and chocolate after noon.
- You should finish eating dinner 3 hours before you want to go to sleep.

Take your sleep medicine

- If you take sleep medicine, ask your nurse to bring it to you 1 hour before you want to go to sleep.
- You should take your sleep medicine between 9 p.m. and midnight, so you aren't sleepy the next day.

Relax before bed

To relax before going to sleep, try any of the following relaxation activities:

- Deep breathing exercises. See the section “Deep Breathing Exercise” for instructions.
- Meditation. You can find guided meditations for sleep here: www.mskcc.org/meditation.
- Massage.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Reading.

Keep your room dark

- Lower the blackout window shades.
- Close the curtains.
- Turn off the TV and computer screens.
- Use an eye mask.

Keep the room quiet

- Silence your cell phone after 10 p.m.
- If you must keep the TV on, use headphones, so you don’t disturb your roommate.
- Use earplugs to block out noise.
- Listen to white noise, such as a playlist with ocean sounds. Make sure to use headphones.

If you can’t fall asleep

Try to ease your mind with these strategies:

- If you can’t fall asleep, get up and take a short walk. You can also try a short activity, such as reading a book. Then, do a relaxing activity.

Deep breathing exercise

Deep breathing is an exercise that can help you relax. It's very simple, and you can teach it to yourself. It can help you clear your mind, release tension or stress and help you sleep better. You can do it any time you feel stressed or anxious.

1. Sit comfortably in a chair or lie in your bed. If you're lying in bed, raise your head on several pillows.
2. Place 1 hand on your stomach, just above your belly button.
3. Breathe out completely through your mouth.
4. Close your eyes, if you can. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Imagine your stomach is like a balloon filling with air. Feel your stomach rise and push against your hand.
5. Pause for a few seconds. Then, breathe out slowly through your mouth or nose. Imagine the balloon slowly emptying as your stomach falls.
6. As you breathe out, allow your body to relax.
7. Repeat this exercise 5 to 10 times.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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