Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Improving Your Sleep at Home

This information will help you improve your sleep when you're at home.

Sleeping well at night is very important for your physical and mental health. Getting the sleep you need:

- Improves your ability to learn, remember, and solve problems.
- Lowers your blood pressure.
- Helps you control your weight.
- Strengthens your immune system, which is your body's way of fighting off infections.
- Helps your body heal.
- Gives you more energy during the day.

Some people with cancer or cancer survivors may have problems sleeping. These can include:

- Feeling sleepy during the day.
- Having trouble falling asleep.
- Waking up in the middle of the night.

Problems with sleep can also be caused by medical conditions other than cancer. Talk with your healthcare provider if you think this might be an issue for you. For more information on sleep problems, read *Managing Insomnia* (www.mskcc.org/pe/insomnia).

Ways to improve sleep

If you’re having trouble sleeping, try the following ideas.

During the day

Exercise

- Do some form of exercise each day.
- Stop exercising 2 to 3 hours before bedtime.

Get some sunlight

- Try to get some sunlight each day, especially in the morning. Light helps your body know what time of the day it is. Open your window shades or go outside.

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, nap earlier in the day and set an alarm to wake you up after 30 minutes.

Keep track of your sleep

- Keep a sleep diary or a record of the times you go to sleep (including naps) and wake up (including during the night). This can help show you any patterns that are affecting your sleep.

Use the sleep diary below or make your own. Bring it with you to show your healthcare provider if you’re having problems sleeping.

Sleep diary example

Date	*Example*: 7/7/2022				
Time you	10 p.m.				

went to bed					
Time it took to fall asleep	20 minutes				
Number of times you woke up during the night	2 times				
Time you woke up for the day	7 a.m.				
Total number of hours slept	8 hours				
Naps: How many/how long was each nap?	I took 2 naps. One at noon for 15 mins, and one at 4 p.m. for 30 mins				
Notes	Didn't eat before bed, listened to music before bed				

Ask about treatments that can help

Ask your healthcare providers about treatments available to improve your sleep, including cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I).. This can be effective without the use of medication. For more information, read *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia* (www.mskcc.org/pe/cognitive_behavioral_therapy)

- There are some medications that can help if other treatments don’t work. Talk with your healthcare provider for more information.
- Contact MSK’s Counseling Center to meet with a sleep specialist. Their number is 646-888-0200.
- The MSK Integrative Medicine Service has relaxation therapies that may help you sleep better. You can contact them at 646-449-1010 or go to www.msk.org/integrativemedicine

At bedtime

Turn down the lights

- Light tells your brain to stay awake, so turning down the lights will help your body get ready to sleep. Turn off any bright lights and use low-watt light bulbs or nightlights in the evening (including in the bathroom).
- Avoid devices with blue lights 2 to 3 hours before bedtime. These devices include your cellphone, tablet, computer, and LED light bulbs. If you need to use your electronic device, dim the screen if you can. You can also buy a pair of blue light blocking glasses to wear when using an electronic device.

Limit food and drinks

- Avoid caffeine, such as coffee, black or green tea, sodas, and chocolate several hours before bedtime.
- Don’t smoke, use electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes), or use other nicotine products several hours before bedtime. They can keep you awake.
- Avoid drinking alcohol. It may help you fall asleep, but it can make you wake up in the middle of the night.
- Finish eating dinner at least 3 hours before you want to go to sleep.
- Try not to drink too many liquids, such as water or juice, before bedtime, especially if you often get up at night to urinate (pee). Getting up a lot during the night can interrupt your sleep schedule and make you more

tired during the day.

Make your bedroom comfortable

- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and cool. If you can’t make your bedroom dark, use a sleep mask.
- If noise is a problem, try earplugs or white noise, such as a playlist with ocean sounds.
- Switch to a heavier or lighter blanket as the seasons change.
- Don’t watch TV, use the computer or smartphone, or talk on the phone while lying in bed. Use your bed only for sleep and sexual activity.
- Avoid letting pets sleep in your bedroom because they may move and wake you up.

Relax before bed

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

- Deep breathing exercises. See the “Deep breathing exercise” section of this resource for instructions.
- Meditation. You can find guided meditations for sleep here: www.mskcc.org/meditation
- Massage.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Reading.
- A warm bath.

Ease your mind

- If you can’t get your mind off your worries, make a list of things you’re worried about. Then, write down what you can do to stop or lessen that worry. For example, you may ask your doctor about a symptom or talk about your fears with a friend or family member. Tell yourself that you will do those things the next day.

- 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 for 30 minutes. Then, do a relaxation activity.
- Turn your clocks so that you can’t see them. Staring at the clock can keep you awake and worried.

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. If you’re right-handed, use your right hand. If you’re left-handed, use your left hand.
3. Breathe out completely through your mouth.
4. If you can, close your eyes and breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Feel your stomach push up on your hand. Imagine that air is filling your whole body from the bottom up.
5. Pause for a couple of seconds. Then, breathe out slowly through your mouth or nose. Try to breathe out completely and imagine the air leaving your lungs, mouth, or nose.
6. As you breathe out, allow your body to relax and go limp, like a rag doll.
7. Repeat this exercise 5 to 10 times.

Be safe when getting out of bed

- Make sure the floor around your bed is clear so that you will not trip and fall.
- Use nightlights in the bathroom and hall.
- Keep a glass of water, a phone, and a lamp by your bed in case you need

them.

Stick with a routine

- Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time in the morning, even on the weekends.

Other resources

Visit www.msk.org/cancer-care/survivorship/videos-survivors/improving-sleep-after-treatment to watch a video on ways to improve your sleep after treatment.

Counseling Center

www.msk.org/counseling
646-888-0200
Many people find that counseling helps them. Our counseling center offers counseling for individuals, couples, families, and groups. We can also prescribe medications to help if you feel anxious or depressed. To make an appointment, ask your healthcare provider for a referral or call the number above.

Resources for Life After Cancer (RLAC) Program

646-888-8106
At MSK, care does not end after your treatment. The RLAC Program is for patients and their families who have finished treatment.

This program has many services. We offer seminars, workshops, support groups, and counseling on life after treatment. We can also help with insurance and employment issues.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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

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