Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Insomnia for Caregivers

This information explains what insomnia is and how you can manage it while caring for a loved one.

About insomnia

Insomnia is having trouble falling or staying asleep, waking up too early, or more than one of these things. It can happen even when you have enough time to sleep. People with insomnia often have trouble going back to sleep after they wake up.

It's recommended that adults get about 7 or more hours of sleep a night.

Causes of insomnia for caregivers

Caring for a loved one with cancer can be a rewarding experience that brings meaning and purpose. Caregiving while handling your own responsibilities, feelings, and concerns about your loved one's illness can cause anxiety or stress.

Being a caregiver comes with many tasks, such as managing medications, cooking, doing paperwork, making appointments, and tracking symptoms. You may feel like you need to do all these at once, which can be overwhelming. This is why it's common for caregivers to feel too stressed to sleep.

Read *Managing Anxiety for Caregivers* (www.mskcc.org/pe/anxiety-caregivers) for more information on managing anxiety or stress.

Insomnia can also be caused by:

- Changes to your daily routine or environment caused by your role as a caregiver.
- Having a hard time creating a peaceful space to sleep. This can be especially hard if you sleep with the person you are caring for.
- Feeling like you always have to be awake and ready to care for your loved one.
- Unhealthy sleep habits. This includes watching TV in bed or using your bed for activities other than sleep or sexual activity.
- Feeling like you don't have control over your own life.
- Not having enough support from family, friends, healthcare team, or other people in your life.
- Some medications.
- Medical problems.

Signs of insomnia in caregivers

Insomnia can cause physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, or both. It's important to recognize the signs of insomnia and ask for help when you need to.

Signs of insomnia include:

- Trouble falling asleep.
- Waking up often during the night and having trouble getting back to sleep.
- Waking up too early in the morning.
- Feeling very tired during the day and having low energy.
- Trouble concentrating, which can affect the way you work or study.

If you have any of these signs, talk with your healthcare provider.

Effects of insomnia on caregivers

Insomnia can:

- Make you feel tired and have little energy throughout the day.
- Affect your physical and mental health.
- Kill brain cells and cause memory loss.
- Make it harder for you to take care of your loved one and attend to their needs.

After just 1 night of sleeplessness, you're more likely to:

- Catch a cold
- Have an accident
- Feel strong emotions
- Lose focus

After repeatedly getting less than 7 hours of sleep, you raise your risk of:

- Depression
- Stroke
- Heart disease
- Colorectal and breast cancers
- Diabetes
- Premature (early) death

Tips for managing insomnia for caregivers

Insomnia can affect your mood, your health, and the care you provide to your loved one. This is why it's important to take care of yourself. If you don't, you may feel like you're too stressed or tired to do anything.

Here are some tips that can help:

Set a regular sleep schedule

Have a regular schedule with a set sleep and wake time. This can help you fall asleep and wake up rested.

Do light physical activity

Light physical activity can help your body get ready for sleep at night. Get out into the fresh air and sunshine by going for a walk or a short bike ride. Talk with your doctor before starting new exercises.

Create an ideal sleep environment

Make sure that the room you sleep in is cool, dark, and quiet. Your bed, pillow, and sheets should be comfortable for you.

If you have pets that are active at night, try not to let them sleep in your bed with you. Take them out of your bedroom or put them on the floor in their own bed. This will help keep them from disturbing you while you sleep.

Relax and calm down before bed

Avoid bright lights and stimulating activities before bedtime, such as vigorous exercise or stressful tasks for work. Create a calm and relaxing bedtime routine. Take a hot shower or bath before bed, write in a journal, read, or do gentle stretching exercises or yoga.

Ask for help and accept it

Ask your friends and family members for help with household chores or with preparing meals. When people offer their help, take it. Feeling guilty about accepting help is normal, but needing support isn't a sign of weakness or failure. You'll sleep better and take better care of your loved one and yourself better the less overwhelmed you feel.

Try relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques can help you manage your anxiety and improve sleep. Try deep breathing, meditation, and acupressure (putting pressure on parts of your body to help you relax). You can also visit www.msk.org/meditation to listen to free guided meditations.

Avoid blue light 2 to 3 hours before bedtime

Blue light is the light that comes from electronic devices, such as your cellphone, tablet, computer, and LED light bulbs. Many devices have a blue light filter that you can set for nighttime. You can also buy a pair of blue light blocking glasses to wear when using an device.

Medication

If insomnia is getting in the way of your daily activities, medication may be helpful. There are many medications that can help improve your mood and treat insomnia. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider or call 646-888-0200 to make an appointment with the Counseling Center.

Treatments for insomnia

No matter how long you've had insomnia, there are treatments that can help. Talk with your healthcare provider about treatments for insomnia. The first step is to tell your healthcare team. They can guide you to the right resources.

Integrative medicine therapies for insomnia at MSK

MSK offers many integrative medicine therapies to treat or manage insomnia, including:

Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I)

CBT-I is a type of talk therapy that helps people change their sleeping habits without using medication.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a form of treatment in traditional Chinese medicine. An acupuncturist will apply very thin needles to certain points on your body. Research shows that acupuncture may help treat insomnia. Read *About Acupuncture* (www.mskcc.org/pe/about-acupuncture) for more information.

Call 646-608-8550 or visit www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine for more information about other integrative medicine therapies that can help you manage insomnia.

MSK resources

If insomnia is affecting your life in any way, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also contact any of the resources in this section for help. We can help you find the right treatment for you.

Social Work

212-639-7020
www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/individual-family-counseling/social-work-experts
Our social workers provide emotional support and guidance to patients and their families, friends, and caregivers. Social work offers programs, including both in-person and online support groups. They can also help with practical issues such as transportation to and from medical appointments, temporary housing, and financial concerns. Social workers are available at every MSK location. To talk with a social worker, ask your doctor or nurse, or call 212-639-7020.

Counseling Center

646-888-0200
www.msk.org/experience/patient-support/counseling
Many people find that counseling helps them manage their emotions during caregiving. MSK's counselors provide counseling for individuals, couples, families, caregivers, and groups. They can also prescribe medications to help with anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. For more

information, ask your doctor or nurse, or call 646-888-0200.

The Caregivers Clinic

The Caregivers Clinic provides support specifically for caregivers who are having trouble coping with the demands of being a caregiver. Call 646-888-0200 for more information.

Location

MSK's Counseling Center
641 Lexington Avenue (on 54th Street between Lexington and Third avenues)
7th floor
New York, NY 10022

Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service

Our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service offers many services to complement (go along with) traditional medical care. These include music therapy, mind/body therapies, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. To schedule an appointment for these services, call 646-449-1010.

You can also schedule a consultation with a healthcare provider in the Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service. They will work with you to come up with a plan for creating a healthy lifestyle and managing side effects. To make an appointment, call 646-608-8550.

Hours

Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Location

Bendheim Integrative Medicine Center
205 East 64th Street (on 64th Street between Second and Third avenues)
New York, NY 10065

Patient and Caregiver Education

www.mskcc.org/pe

Visit the Patient and Caregiver Education website to search our virtual library. There, you can find written educational resources, videos, and online programs.

Virtual Programs

www.msk.org/vp

MSK's Virtual Programs offer online education and support for patients and caregivers, even when you can't come to MSK in person. Through live, interactive sessions, you can learn about your loved one's diagnosis, what to expect during treatment, and how to prepare for the various stages of cancer care. Sessions are confidential, free, and led by expert clinical staff. If you're interested in joining a Virtual Program, visit www.msk.org/vp for more information.

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

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